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Exploring the Impact of Exchange:
A Study of Central Asian Experiences
with U.S.-Sponsored Academic Exchange Programs

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the trends and impact of U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs available for Central Asian citizens. I analyze how these exchange programs have fared since their establishment to the present day by outlining the scale of these programs, exploring how participants have been affected by their exchange experience, and conclude by providing recommendations for possible directions exchanges can take in the future. Within this research project, I examine prevalent trends of Central Asian citizens participating in U.S.-sponsored exchange programs. Through in-person interviews and participants' online statements, I identify broader issues that are important in the exchange experience. This thesis aims to assist local citizens of the United States and Central Asia in understanding why Central Asian citizens should continue to pursue academic exchanges and why policy makers should prioritize these exchange programs for strategic diplomacy planning.

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GLOSSARY

American Councils	American Councils for International Education, an organization that facilitates international exchange programs, including FLEX.
ACTR/ACCELS	The American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) is an association of language and area professionals involved with Russian language, literature, and linguistics. The American Councils for Collaboration in Education and Language Study is a division of American Council's mission beyond Russian.
ECA	The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States fosters mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and the people of other countries.
FLEX	Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) is an exchange program for administered by the U.S. Department of State for high school students from the former Soviet Union and is funded through the Freedom Support Act.
Fulbright	American scholarship program of competitive, merit-based grants for international educational exchange for students, scholars, teachers, professionals, scientists, and artists.
Global UGRAD	Global UGRAD is an American international student exchange program. It provides exchange opportunities for university students from the Near East, South Asia, and from Sub-Saharan Africa to attend American universities for year of study.
IREX	The International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) is an international, nonprofit organization that specializes in global education and development. IREX designs and implements programs that focus on civil society, education, gender, governance, leadership media, technology, and youth.
SUSI	Study of the U.S. Institutes (SUSIs) for Scholars and Secondary Educators are post-graduate level academic programs for mid-career foreign scholars, faculty, practitioners, and secondary educators designed to strengthen curricula and to improve the teaching about the United States in academic institutions abroad.
World Learning	World Learning is a global NGO empowering people and strengthening institutions through education, sustainable development, and exchange programs. World Learning facilitates the SUSI program. ¹

¹ Program definitions were directly quoted from the Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' website.

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

“At the height of the Cold War, President Eisenhower believed the chances of future global conflicts would be lessened if people and organized groups were involved in citizen diplomacy...” (Burrige, 2001).² When the first academic exchanges took place between the Soviet Union and the United States, the diplomatic relationship between the two regions was deteriorating due to political and military tension during the Cold War. Despite rising tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, as the Soviet Union began to open its borders, there was an increase in exchange program participation. From 1958 to 1988, approximately 50,000 Soviet citizens were authorized by the KGB to come to the United States.³ These citizens paved the path for the creation of other U.S.-sponsored exchange programs, including those active in the Central Asian region today.

This research project focuses on understanding the trends surrounding U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs for Central Asian citizens since the end of the Soviet era to present-day. I uncover how these programs have shaped relations between the United States and the Central Asian region by examining the impacts of these exchange programs. This research adds to the literature on United States and Central Asian academic exchanges and provides a window to the participants’ experiences regarding this matter, which is an often-overlooked aspect when researching the impact of academic exchange programs. Existing literature suggests that exchanges can be used as a tool for diplomacy building. By examining how participants

² Burrige, G., & Burrows, A. (2001, May 03). Seattle's Sister-city Program. Retrieved December 04, 2016, from <http://historylink.org/File/3254>

³ Richmond, Y. (2013, March). Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: How the West Won. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2013/0105/ca/richmond_exchange.html

interpret their experience, we can understand what factors are important in these programs, and how they have affected participants' lives and their respective communities.

In today's political climate, exchange programs, J-1 visa programs in particular, are increasingly at risk of termination.⁴ Through my experiences both professionally and academically, I have learned that these programs often shape students' global perspectives, giving them strong social connections and applicable skills after they return home. My hope is that by exhibiting these exchange experiences, I can demonstrate the need for keeping these programs alive. Likewise, it will be helpful to explore whether there are other factors driving any trends of students from the Central Asian region (i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) coming to the United States. As such, I set out to ask the following questions for this research project:

1. How have Central Asian academic exchange participants made sense of their academic exchange experience to the United States?
2. What kind of impact do U.S.-sponsored academic exchanges have on Central Asian citizens?

To answer these questions, I take a multi-methodological approach by applying the strengths of quantitative and qualitative research. Three primary methods frame the research: an analysis of U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs available for Central Asian citizens, a collection of alumni stories published online, and in-depth interviews with exchange participants from Central Asia.

⁴ Tillet, E. (2017, August 28). Report: Trump to consider cuts to cultural exchange visa program. Retrieved November 28, 2017, from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-trump-to-consider-cuts-to-cultural-exchange-visa-program/>

In Chapter Two, I provide a brief history of active U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs for Central Asian citizens and I analyze literature sources on academic exchanges as a tool for diplomacy building. Chapter Three explains the methodologies used to frame my research: I examine the participation data of four U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs to identify patterns of program effectiveness, I analyze online content regarding participant stories to see how participants publicize their interpretation of their experiences abroad, and I conduct in-person interviews with Central Asian exchange participants on the topic of how exchanges have impacted their life, family, friends, and local community. Chapter Four provides an overview of the research findings, offering insight into the scale of these exchange programs, their impact on exchange participants, as well as a highlight of prevalent trends of Central Asian citizens participating in U.S.-sponsored exchange programs. The conclusion interprets the findings, as well as hypothesizes possible improvements for U.S.-Central Asian exchange programs.

I argue that U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs, in addition to their requirements for becoming involved in local communities and their mission for fostering cultural togetherness, offer additional values that can be used as instruments for positively impacting people's lives and promoting global diplomacy. Measuring impact is an often debated subject, and I believe that this interdisciplinary approach offers a new take on the matter and approaches academic exchanges and international education from a new angle. There is very little literature available on the matter of academic exchanges between the United States and Central Asia; as such, this study will serve as a guide for citizens of the United States and Central Asia in understanding why Central Asian citizens should continue to pursue academic exchanges and why policy makers should prioritize these exchange programs for strategic diplomacy planning.

Chapter 2. HISTORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As part of the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961, the United States has been creating opportunities for international citizens to come to the United States through a variety of exchange programs. The United States Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) facilitates the United States' educational and cultural exchange programs. The ECA was established with the intention of creating and strengthening global partnerships; it aims to “increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange that assist in the development of peaceful relations.”⁵ Despite rising conflicts between the United States and other nations, various exchange programs supported by the ECA continue to develop international relationships, while simultaneously influencing the nation's foreign policy.

Academic exchanges were initially created with the intention of being used as a tool for diplomacy building, especially after the atrocities of World War II and the Cold War. In November of 1985, a meeting was held in Geneva between President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. In this meeting, the two signed an agreement to extend a previous agreement made in 1958 that approved cultural, scientific and educational exchanges. The combination of this agreement, Glasnost and the people-to-people initiative saw a boom in a variety of exchanges in the Soviet region, including the Central Asian Republics. During the Soviet era, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) administered 90% of the academic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. “As of 1988, the number of Soviet scholars pursuing long-term research (up to one year) in the United States under IREX had for some years been

⁵ History of ECA. (n.d.). Retrieved December 02, 2017, from <https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/eca-history/index.html#ECA>

about 40 per year, in that year the Soviet authorities urged that the number be increased to up to 100 in 1989 and to 200 or even more for 1990-91” (Burn, 1991).⁶ Initially, these exchanges had participants primarily from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, with only a few from the non-Slavic regions. However, as the quotas outlined in the agreement increased, a notable increase in participation from those regions followed.⁷

2.1 EXCHANGES IN CENTRAL ASIA

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, more opportunities for academic exchanges became possible. “[Since the collapse of the Soviet Union], a large number of students from Central Asia and the former Soviet Union as a whole have gone to study in the United States. A large number of students were subsidized by governments both within the region and outside of it” (Mikosz, 2004).⁸ Mikosz explains that in 1993, Central Asia had only 66 citizens participate in an academic exchange program to the United States. However, by 2001, there was a significant growth of 1,300 participants. Fig. 1.1 is a graph created by Mikosz that demonstrates the growth of Central Asian students going on an academic exchange program in the United States; this graph especially emphasizes the growth of student participation from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in U.S. academic exchange programs.

⁶ Burn, B. B. (1991). Academic Exchanges Between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. *Higher Education Policy*, 4(3), 39-43.

⁷ Richmond, Y. (2010). *Cultural exchange and the cold war: Raising the iron curtain*. Penn State Press.

⁸ Mikosz, D. J. (2004). Academic Exchange Programs in Central Asia. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia* (pp. 113-125). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing. Pg. 113.

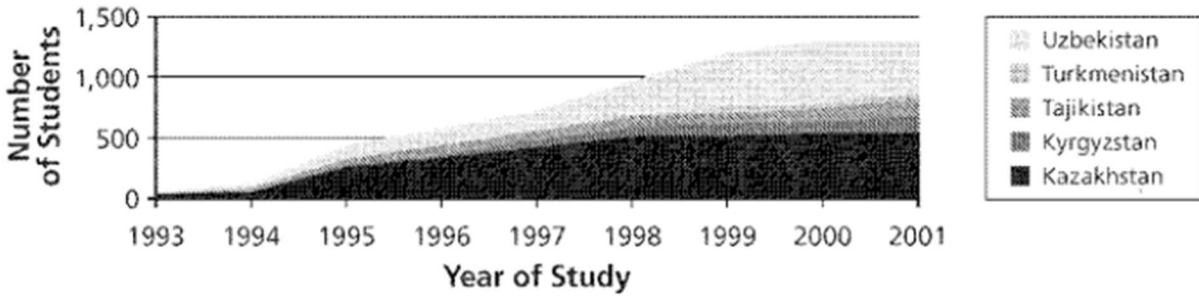


Figure 1.1 Mikosz' Graph on Central Asian Students in the United States⁹

In comparison to the U.S.-sponsored exchange programs that are active today, much of the academic exchanges that were available shortly after the Soviet era were largely supported by regional governments. Table 1.1 provides an overview of which academic exchange programs were available for Central Asians following the Soviet era. The information was gathered through Mikosz' research on the programs; however, not much detail was available regarding the years of operation and the number of participants. Additionally, there was no record for academic exchange programs that were established by governments in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Table 1.1 Exchange Programs Created by Regional Governments

Name of Program	Country	Goals of the Program	Years of Operation	Number of Participants
Bolashak	Kazakhstan	In the earlier stages, the exchange organization had partnered with ACTR/ACCELS, an American NGO that administers government-organized programs, to create academic exchange opportunities for Kazakh citizens in the United States, as well as other countries.	1993 - Present	3,173 Kazakh students participated in the program between 1994-2001. ¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. Pgs. 114-115.

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 116.

Cadre for the 21 st Century	Kyrgyzstan	This program aimed to send Kyrgyz students to the United States as well as other countries.	1995 - Unknown	Roughly 67 Kyrgyz students have participated in the program. ¹¹
Kamelot Youth Program; known today as the “Union of the Youth”	Uzbekistan	The program’s main goals are “to unite young people, to raise them on the basis of the requirements of a healthy lifestyle, and also to assist them in finding a proper place in society.” ¹²	1996 - Present	Unknown
UMID	Uzbekistan	The UMID program primarily focuses on sending Uzbek students to other countries aside from the United States, even though it did send participants over to the United States initially.	1997 - Unknown	157 Uzbek students were sent to the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan for bachelors and masters’ degree study within the first year. ¹³

2.1.1 U.S.-Sponsored Exchange Programs in Uzbekistan

In contrast to the other four Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan began to diminish their participation in U.S.-sponsored academic exchanges as of 2005, the same year in which the Andijan massacre occurred. Authors Babaev and Steiner-Khamsi refer to the change in academic exchange participation as a catalyst for the United States’ and Uzbekistan’s deteriorating diplomatic relationship. After the United States cut assistance funding for Uzbekistan, American troops were forced to leave the military base they had been occupying since 2000. In 2008, the only American program present in Uzbekistan was the United States Embassy. Shortly after, Uzbekistan’s relations with Russia began to strengthen, causing the Uzbekistan’s relationship

¹¹ Ibid. Pg. 119.

¹² Public Youth Movement (Kamelot). (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2018, from <http://www.pecob.eu/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/EN/IDPagina/2207>

¹³ Mikosz, D. J. (2004). Academic Exchange Programs in Central Asia. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia* (pp. 113-125). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing. Pg. 117.

with the United States to weaken further. Following this, several United States organizations, such as ACCELS, OSI, and IREX which facilitated government-sponsored exchanges had closed, further deteriorating exchange opportunities between the United States and Uzbekistan. Despite this decrease in cooperation, the Uzbek authorities did not deny its citizens the ability to study abroad in the United States if they desired to.

Currently, exchange administering organizations do not operate within Uzbekistan, however, they may utilize the United States Embassy in Tashkent to recruit Uzbek students. The United States Embassy “helps disseminate information, collect and forward applications from Uzbekistani citizens to the respective administering agency, assist with testing semifinalists, help with sending the finalists to the US, and assist with other aspects relating to exchange program logistics and organization.” Additionally, Uzbekistani nationals may apply to American colleges and universities, opening another avenue through which they may experience American culture abroad. This form of exchange however, is not funded by the United States government and as such, students must rely on their own family funds or financial assistance through the university or college (Babaev and Steiner-Khamsi, 2009).¹⁴

2.1.2 *Historical Analysis*

The history of available exchange opportunities to the United States for Central Asian citizens has demonstrated that exchange programs have transformed over time. Much of this transformation is accredited to the change of political status as well as initiatives placed towards citizen diplomacy. During the Soviet era, exchanges were primarily established to meet specific

¹⁴ Babaev, A., & Steiner-Khamsi, Gita. (2009). *International Exchanges in Uzbekistan since 2005*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

objectives on both sides. According to Yale Richmond, through exchanges with the United States, the Soviets had hoped to:

1. Obtain access to U.S. science and technology;
2. Learn more about the United States;
3. Support the view that the Soviet Union was the equal of the United States by engaging Americans in bilateral activities;
4. Promote a view of the Soviet Union as a peaceful power seeking cooperation with the United States;
5. Demonstrate achievements of the Soviet people;
6. Give vent to the pent-up demand of Soviet scholars, scientists, performing artists, athletes, and intellectuals for foreign travel and contacts;
7. Earn foreign currency through performances abroad of Soviet artists and athletes whose fees and honoraria went, not to the participating individuals, but to the Soviet state.

Whereas, the Americans had the following objectives for pursuing exchanges with the Soviet Union:

1. Broaden and deepen relations with the Soviet Union by expanding contacts between people and institutions of the two countries;
2. Involve the Soviets in joint activities and develop habits of cooperation with the United States;
3. End Soviet isolation and inward orientation by giving it a broader view of the world and itself;
4. Improve U.S. understanding of the Soviet Union through access to its institutions and people;
5. Obtain the benefits of long-range cooperation in culture, education, science and technology.¹⁵

After the Soviet era, exchange programs continued to flourish, though these programs were tailored towards putting a stop to the Cold War. As Central Asian regions have gained independence and established their own identity and political values over time, each country within the region has maintained their own respective relationship with the United States and as a result, sustained varying degrees of participation in exchange programs. As demonstrated with historical trends, the success of each exchange program primarily relies on the initiative of the

¹⁵ Richmond, Y. (2013, March). Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: How the West Won. Retrieved January 28, 2018, from http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2013/0105/ca/richmond_exchange.html

individual as well as the ongoing political relationship between the United States and the Central Asian country. The United States continues to invest in exchange programs in order to expand the knowledge and connections among citizens in both regions.

2.2 RELATED STUDIES

While not much research is available on academic exchanges in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union, there exists quite a bit of literature on the overall impact of U.S.-sponsored exchanges. There are several common themes surrounding scholarly research on exchanges between the United States and other nations. Major themes include the importance of exchanges, overview of exchange experience outcomes, diplomatic strategies related to exchanges and recommendations for the future.

2.2.1 *The Importance of Exchanges*

During the Cold War, exchange programs were used as a primary tool for diplomacy building between the United States and the Soviet Union; because of this, a large number of researchers within the field utilize exchange examples from the Soviet era to analyze successes and failures in U.S. citizen diplomacy efforts. Through their analysis, it becomes apparent that exchanges had a significant impact in facilitating mutual understanding between the two regions. Author Nancy Snow refers back to the United States' political status in 1954 to demonstrate how academic exchanges grew in importance for foreign affairs. Snow writes:

The cold war battle between United States capitalism and U.S.S.R. communism was well under way in the mid-1950s. Any vestiges of American isolationism that had endured the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor were fast fading as the United States sought an evaluation of its reputation and image in the world. A particularly appropriate tool for this evaluation was an examination of how the United States was viewed by others, notably foreign nationals visiting or studying in the United States and foreign persons who had contact with Americans visiting

or studying abroad. These intercultural perspectives were seen then as a matter of national security and geopolitical power.¹⁶

Snow claims that the cold war set a precedent for important public diplomacy lessons and that diplomacy methods that were practiced then, such as implementing cross-cultural exchanges, are applicable to today's political climate (Snow, 2008).¹⁷ Author Barbara B. Burn has a similar claim to Snow, in that the cold war set an example for the future of exchanges. Burn states that prior to the Cold War, there was stagnation in the numbers of those who participated in an exchange to the United States. The Cold War and the agreements made thereafter caused a drastic change in political development, resulting in an increase in exchange participation (Burn, 2008).¹⁸

Yale Richmond promotes the importance of exchanges as well by demonstrating how exchanges influence whether political relations were good or bad between nations. He makes the claim that exchanges serve as a representation of a political relationship and are more necessary than previously recognized. Richmond states:

Exchanges served as a barometer of U.S.-Soviet relations. When relations between the two superpowers were good, exchanges flourished and expanded; when relations chilled, exchanges suffered. During the worst years of the Vietnam War, the Soviets cut back on several exchanges. ... Scholarly exchanges continued, however, despite the ups and downs in relations, although at reduced levels at times (Richmond, 2010).¹⁹

Byrnes' opinion on the importance of exchanges also reflects its status as a symbol, "It has served as a link between two contentious states at delicate times, when failure, cancelation, or a

¹⁶ Snow, N. (2008). International exchanges and the US image. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), Pg. 199.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 214.

¹⁸ Burn, B. B. (1991). Academic Exchanges Between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. *Higher Education Policy*, 4(3). Pg. 39.

¹⁹ Richmond, Y. (2010). *Cultural exchange and the cold war: Raising the iron curtain*. Penn State Press. Pg. 20

breach of one kind or other might have intensified a crisis. It has helped bring about other changes, and it has made prospects for continued peace a little brighter” (Byrnes, 1976).²⁰

2.2.2 *Outcomes and Roles of Exchanges*

Another theme related to exchanges in scholarly literature is the outcome and the role of an exchange. Carol Ballamy and Adam Weinberg make a claim by the effect an exchange experience has on citizens, “Through all of these [exchange] programs, people come together one on one to develop friendships while acquiring the intercultural skills and curiosity about the world needed to become citizen diplomats in their daily lives.”²¹ However, while examining the trends surrounding exchanges between the years of 1958-1975, Burn identified several negative outcomes associated with exchanges, such as: poor communication between the United States and the Soviet Union, difficulty with air travel and processing visas, political changes and inconsistent organizational staffing, language barriers on both sides, financial factors, commercialization of academic exchanges, conflicting education systems, exchange participants having their own agendas for going abroad (Burn, 1991).²² Snow’s opinion is that exchanges maintain importance in foreign affairs because they encourage “dialogue in overcoming stereotypes, building relationships and enhancing the national reputation of the United States during ideological contests” (Snow, 2008). Whereas, Mikosz refers to the benefits a participant receives from an exchange experience, such as fostering a global understanding and making connections. Mikosz writes, “The alumni of these programs speak English remarkably well and

²⁰ Byrnes, R. (1976). *Soviet-American academic exchanges, 1958-1975*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Pg. 234

²¹ Bellamy, C., & Weinberg, A. (2008). Educational and Cultural Exchanges to Restore America’s Image. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31(3). Pg. 59.

²² Burn, B. B. (1991). Academic Exchanges Between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. *Higher Education Policy*, 4(3). Pgs. 41-42.

are well prepared for competing for and succeeding in exchange programs. They also benefit from the networks of contacts they make in the United States” (Mikosz, 2004).²³

Author Anatoli Rapoport argues that international exchange programs have a vital role in the development of international cooperation between educators of different nations. To compare the perception of exchange programs and their outcomes, Rapoport conducted observations and in-depth interviews with 35 alumni from the United States and Russia. In his findings, Rapoport found that Russian and American alumni generally felt that their international exchange experience had a positive impact.²⁴ Rapoport also noted that the Russian and American alumni had differences of opinions regarding interpretations of program outcomes and the roles of program participants. Unlike the American alumni, the Russian alumni felt that their participation in an exchange program was more of an award and that their success in obtaining professional mobility and social status was a result of having had the experience abroad.²⁵ Rapoport concludes his research by claiming that there were “differences in the understanding and perception of various phenomena that participants experienced in the course of their programs. The way in which the informants interpreted their exchange experiences was closely related to the context they were familiar with. ... [They all] agreed that their programs were useful and successful” (Rapoport, 2008)²⁶

Taken as a whole, it appears that the majority of the authors agreed that exchanges have had an active role in foreign affairs and that exchange programs are multidimensional; however, the degree of impact is inconsistent and is based entirely upon citizen involvement and the

²³ Mikosz, D. J. (2004). Academic Exchange Programs in Central Asia. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia* (pp. 113-125). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing. Pg. 121.

²⁴ Rapoport, Anatoli. (2008). Exchange Programs for Educators: American and Russian Perspectives. *Intercultural Education*, 19(1). Pg. 71

²⁵ Ibid. Pgs. 71-72.

²⁶ Ibid. Pg. 79.

structure of each exchange experience. While all the authors appear to agree that exchange programs have had an impact on foreign affairs, they seem to vary on how powerful they feel that impact has been. Most of the authors argue strongly for the positive impacts that exchange programs are capable of, while the remainder agree that there is a positive impact but that it is less meaningful to the overall foreign policies of a region than it appears.

2.2.3 *Scholarly Recommendations for Exchanges*

Among the common themes present in scholarly literature for exchanges is their effectiveness as a strategy for diplomacy building. Ballamy and Weinberg argue that for cultural and educational exchanges to be effective tools for diplomacy, they must the following four principles:

1. Send a diversity of people to a diversity of places
2. Develop exchanges based on principles of deep cultural immersion and interaction
3. Empower current citizen diplomats
4. Target opinion leaders and influencers with a focus on the youth (Ballamy and Weinberg)²⁷

Whereas, Burn argues that for exchanges to be successful in bridging two countries together, the following five categories need to be considered:

1. Adding consortial collaboration to aid in negotiations between two regions
2. Establishing a clearing-house to collect and distribute information on educational institutions
3. Providing more funding towards the development of exchange programs
4. Adding additional support and priority to academic exchange programs
5. Expanding collaboration between the two regions (Burn 1991).²⁸

Snow makes reference to the 9/11 terrorist attacks to discuss poor diplomatic solutions. The terrorist attacks had caused the United States government to enforce restrictions on visa policies,

²⁷ Bellamy, C., & Weinberg, A. (2008). Educational and Cultural Exchanges to Restore America's Image. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31(3). Pg. 61.

²⁸ Burn, B. B. (1991). Academic Exchanges Between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. *Higher Education Policy*, 4(3). Pgs. 42-43.

especially for foreign students and exchange visitors. In response, the United States government made “a compromise of open doors with secure borders, with tensions between the two objectives remaining.”²⁹ To this extent, Snow believes that a compromise is not a realistic diplomatic solution and thus it should consider exchanges as a strategy for improving relations (Snow, 2008).³⁰

Based on personal interviews, surveys, and pre-academic exchange programs between 1956 and 1987, Snow argues that “assessing one’s home culture status vis-à-vis the host culture is vital and that more exchange studies should be undertaken of how others see us after returning home to their compatriots.”³¹ To add to her argument, Snow references the June 2007 report of the Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC), which states that, “The U.S. government should continue its recent trend of increasing funding for critical exchange programs, perhaps the single most effective public diplomacy tool of the last fifty years” (Snow, 2008)³² In their research, Ballamy and Weinberg discovered that exchanges tend to be underestimated in their scalability of impact:

Although most individual exchange programs are small, impacting a few hundred to a few thousand people a year, many programs are operational at any given time. ... These programs bring foreign leaders to the United States to meet their American peers and receive professional training while gaining a better understanding of U.S. history and heritage. ... When taken together, these cultural and education exchange programs already include several million participants every year and could be greatly be expanded with infrastructure. Yet, any conversation about scale has to look beyond the base number of exchanges to include the multiplier effects associated with them. ... In this manner, exchanges have the potential to positively affect tens of millions of people every year.³³

²⁹ Snow, N. (2008). International exchanges and the US image. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), Pg. 214.

³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 218.

³¹ Ibid. Pg. 218.

³² Ibid. Pg. 213.

³³ Ibid. Pg. 60-61.

Ballamy and Weinberg also provided recommendations for moving forward. Through their perspective, the United States needs to increase the visibility of exchange programs, focus on the program structure and measure its impact, and lastly, highlight instances of citizen diplomacy (Ballamy and Weinberg, 2008).³⁴ In Rapoport's research findings, he uncovered that the alumni unanimously agreed that the programs "(a) gave participants an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills in content and methodology; (b) helped to overcome or remove a number of negative stereotypes or old prejudices; (c) required wide dissemination among colleagues; and also (d) needed support from teachers and the administration to sustain over time."³⁵

Through the themes presented relating to the topic of exchanges in available literature, it appears that understanding the role that citizens play in global relationships and examining the trends in diplomatic cooperation, both in the national and state level, are areas of research that could be used to investigate this topic further. While there are many different discussions pertaining to exchanges, the most common theme appears to be whether these exchanges have a significant effect on foreign relations.

³⁴ Bellamy, C., & Weinberg, A. (2008). Educational and Cultural Exchanges to Restore America's Image. *The Washington Quarterly*, 31(3). Pg. 66.

³⁵ Rapoport, Anatoli. (2008). Exchange Programs for Educators: American and Russian Perspectives. *Intercultural Education*, 19(1). Pg. 71

Chapter 3. METHODS AND DATA

In this chapter I outline the various methods in which I collected, organized and analyzed the data included in this thesis. As previously mentioned, much of the research on exchanges in the Soviet Union focuses on Russia, rather than the Central Asian region. To help address this, I explored active U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs available to Central Asian citizens and I conducted in-depth interviews with Central Asian alumni to understand their view on academic exchange programs. For this project, I used a multi-methodological approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research. I first explain my analysis of active exchange programs. I then provide an overview of online alumni stories I collected. After discussing the implementation and the purpose of the collection of online material, I describe a series of in-depth interviews with Central Asian alumni of academic exchange programs. I close the chapter by addressing the study's limitations.

3.1 PROGRAM ANALYSIS

The quantitative aspect of this thesis is the analysis of U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs for Central Asian citizens. The purpose of the analysis is to summarize active programs, describe how they have progressed over the years, and explore how they have impacted Central Asian citizens. I examine annual reports and scholarly sources to determine how many individuals from Central Asia have participated in the following exchange programs: FLEX, SUSI, Fulbright, and Global UGRAD. These programs are the only U.S.-sponsored academic programs available today in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; with the exception of FLEX, which does not operate in

Uzbekistan.³⁶ I also provide an overview of the programs themselves, and refer to published research on the impact of U.S.-sponsored academic programs on Central Asian participants to lay a foundation for presenting the original research I conducted. Conducting this review allowed me to better understand how each program operates and what aspects of an exchange experience the organization wanted to highlight.

3.2 COLLECTIONS OF ONLINE ALUMNI STORIES

I collected online alumni stories published by the Department of State or the exchange program to: collect data on highlighted alumni moments and experiences, gain insight on the operations of a program, and gather a wide range of data to conduct a general comparison of the stories published. I focused on the following academic exchange organizations for my online observations: FLEX, SUSI, Fulbright, and Global UGRAD. The first goal of examining the online alumni stories was to collect the participant's views relating to the process of going abroad to the United States. In particular, I wanted to understand how alumni verbally refer to their experience and what specifically from the exchange was most beneficial for them. Another goal was to see the diversity of alumni that participated in the exchange process and analyze the content of the online stories.

This data offers consistency in that each alumni experience featured includes the participant's name, an overview of their experience, the location of where in Central Asia the participant is from, and which program they participated in. While taking into consideration that the exchange sites may edit out negative commentary, the sites do offer insight into speech patterns that are prominent to Central Asian exchange alumni community. I also compared these

³⁶ Find Programs. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/find-programs>

speech patterns to the interviews I conducted to see if there were trends in how these alumni internalized their experience abroad.

3.3 INTERVIEWS

To supplement the data from the online alumni exchange community, in-depth interviews were conducted in December 2017 with Central Asian exchange alumni. I spoke with nine individuals from Central Asia who have participated in a U.S.-sponsored exchange program. My intention for these interviews was to access the participants' opinions more directly and personally, and to investigate how meaningful academic exchange programs were through the lens of the participant. The interviews allowed me to understand the participants' feelings, impressions, and experiences, in addition to learning more about other aspects of the referenced exchange program. Three interviews took place in-person and the rest took place via Skype. Two of the participants maintained a dual role of being an alumni and former employee of a U.S.-sponsored exchange organization. The interview included questions about their experience with the exchange program, their opinion on academic exchanges with regard to its previous structure and current structure, and their viewpoint on exchanges building relations between the United States and the Central Asian region.³⁷

Due to their differing backgrounds, some of the interview questions were tailored to fit their individual circumstances. The interviews were conducted mainly in English. While transcribing the interviews, I translated what was said in Russian into English. To reduce bias, I attempted to stay neutral and not let my professional or academic opinions guide the way I asked questions. In terms of participant selection for the interviews, my criteria required that the

³⁷ See Appendix B for an example of the interview questions used.

individuals were originally citizens of Central Asia and alumni of a U.S.-sponsored academic exchange program. Approval from the University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB) was received before interviews were conducted and all interviewees gave their consent to have the interview recorded.

I elected to conduct a thematic analysis based on Danah Boyd's suggestions for facilitating interviews.³⁸ In the interviews I conducted, I attempted to make the interviewee as comfortable as possible and continued to ask follow-up questions, even if I already knew the answer. Doing so allowed me to collect the interviewees' responses and reactions to pertinent topics related to academic exchanges. I also employed Dennis Tedlock's guidelines for transcribing the interviews, which allowed me to better capture their speech patterns and portray their thought processes. Tedlock discusses how he uses a system of notations for the reader to understand how he wants his words to be portrayed. As an example, he changes lines to demonstrate a short pause; for intonations, he uses capitals, etc. He uses this system because, "one cannot properly understand a text without understanding its form."³⁹ To follow Tedlock's examples, I recorded each interview and shortly after conducting it, I transcribed them. I listened to the recording multiple times to identify common themes and speech patterns. I then transcribed the interview in a way where the reader can identify pauses and intonations. I also reflected on the relevance of the interviewees' responses in relation to my research questions.

³⁸ Danah boyd, "Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era," in Hargittai, E. and Sandvig, C. (2015). Digital Research Confidential: The Secrets of Studying Behavior Online. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

³⁹ Dennis Tedlock (1983). Learning to listen: Oral history as poetry. In The spoken word and the work of interpretation (pp. 107-123). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

3.4 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

While conducting observations online, I was restricted to the content available on the Department of State's or the exchange program's websites. The content posted only reflected successful alumni experiences and did not offer insight into the challenges one might endure while participating in an exchange program. Additionally, the featured stories could have been purposefully filtered and structured to only feature certain aspects of the program, such as volunteer work, extracurricular activities, etc. While I had reached out to FLEX, SUSI, Fulbright, and Global UGRAD about my thesis research, I was unable to gain access to their alumni networks, as these networks contain sensitive information about the participants. As such, I was limited to testimonials that the organizations have published, and not posted by the alumni themselves. Lastly, Global UGRAD had very little information available on its participants as well as the program itself. As a result, I was unable to acquire as much detail about this particular program.

For the in-depth interviews, I had difficulty locating alumni from Central Asia in my surrounding area. I relied heavily on the two individuals I had initially interviewed to expand my network. In addition, the ideas expressed by the nine exchange alumni interviewed in this study are not necessarily representative of all, or even the majority of other alumni, especially those from other regions. Their responses may also be skewed towards positive aspects as they may not want to represent their program poorly. Furthermore, as many of the interviewees were referred to me by other interviewees, it is less likely that they would refer someone who may have had a negative experience. Finally, a minimal number of interviewees and my observations of the alumni stories online do not allow me to generalize data beyond the information that was presented.

Chapter 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Chapter Four presents the findings of the program analysis, online material, and interviews. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the qualitative data obtained. The second section includes an examination of the online and interview information. I identify several common themes that emerged from the data collection that are associated with the alumni community and I categorize several trends regarding academic exchanges as a whole.

4.1 ANALYSIS OF U.S.-SPONSORED EXCHANGE PROGRAMS FOR CENTRAL ASIAN CITIZENS

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a significant rise in Central Asian participation in United States-sponsored academic exchange programs. An estimated 25,000 students participated in academic exchanges during the Soviet era; however, between the years of 1991-2001, participation had more than doubled to 55,000. Students who took part in these exchanges ranged from high school students to post-graduate professionals.⁴⁰ The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) sponsored a report to be produced by Open Doors, providing comprehensive details on international students who have participated in academic exchanges to the United States. This report demonstrates the rise of exchange participants over time in Central Asia. Fig. 2.1 illustrates the number of students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan that have participated in academic exchanges as is referenced in the Open Doors report.

⁴⁰ Mikosz, D. (2001, March 06). Exchange Programs Having Quiet Impact in Central Asia.

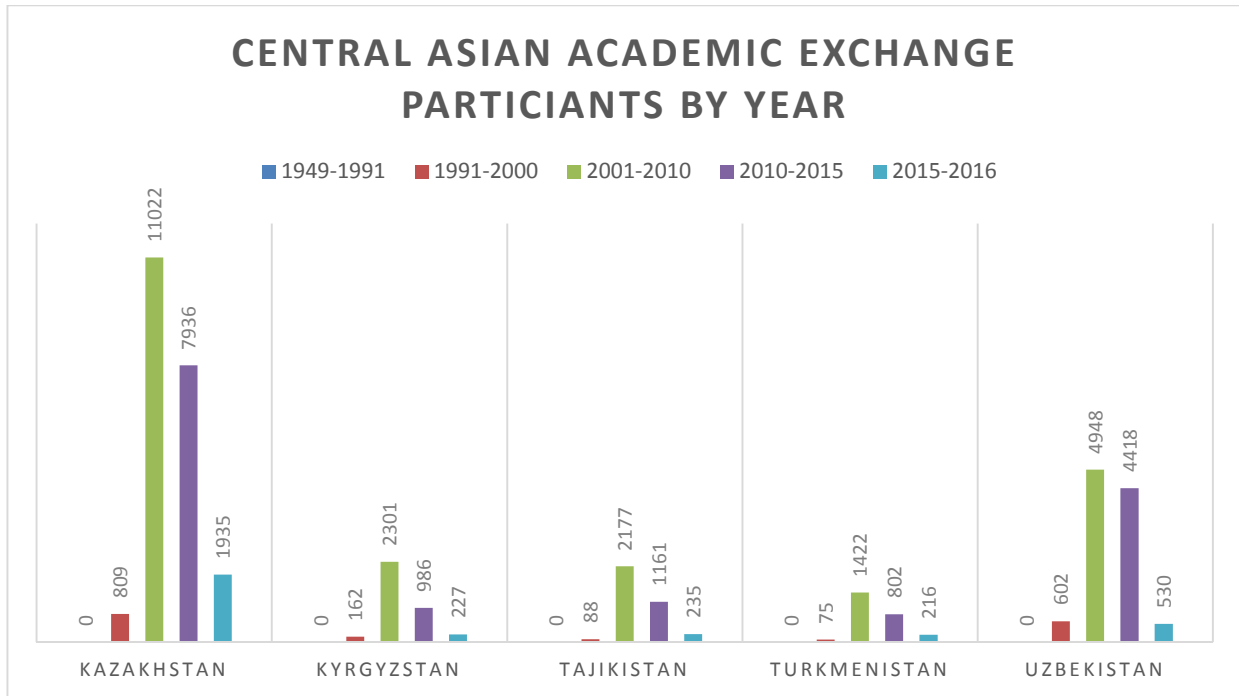


Figure 2.1 Central Asian Academic Exchanges by Year⁴¹

The years 1949-1991 in Fig. 2.1 shows zero participants because there was not any official data available on how many individuals participated in a United States-sponsored academic exchange program during the Soviet era. In the post-Soviet era, 1991-2000, as well as within the past few years, it appears that Kazakhstan had higher participation in U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs than Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In relation to the size of the total country population, Table 2.1 demonstrates the percentage of the total population per country that participated in a U.S.-sponsored exchange programs.

Table 2.1 Population Percentage Participating in a U.S.-Sponsored Exchange Program in 2016⁴²

Country	Population in 2016	Percent of the Population that went on a U.S.-Sponsored Exchange Program
Kazakhstan	17.797 million	0.0109%
Kyrgyzstan	6.083 million	0.0037%
Tajikistan	8.735 million	0.0027%

⁴¹ Open Door - All Places of Origin. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/All-Places-of-Origin/2015-16>

⁴² Population . (n.d.). Retrieved January 29, 2018, from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=KZ-KG-TM-TJ-UZ>

Turkmenistan	5.663 million	0.0038%
Uzbekistan	31.848 million	0.0017%

In September of 2017, the ECA published an annual report on the Performance Measurement Initiative. This report analyzes the performance of 11 U.S.-sponsored exchange programs, including Global UGRAD and SUSI: Women’s Leadership. The study shows that when asked what their top goals are for the exchange program, participants from South and Central Asia listed the following goals in order of importance: “To increase skills (including professional, English Language and Leadership); to increase understanding of the U.S. and U.S. society, people and culture; to increase personal and professional networks; and lastly, to represent home country abroad and share culture with others.”⁴³

The research conducted in the ECA’s Performance Measurement Initiative provides insight on how South and Central Asian participants perceive their exchange experience. Tables 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, and 6.1. demonstrate the research findings within the following categories: Perceptions of the American People and the United States Government; Understanding of American Values and Culture; Personal Growth; Leadership; and Network Building. Regarding how the participants perceived the American people and the United States government, Table 3.1 demonstrates that the participants mostly agreed that their impressions of the two had improved, especially more favorably towards the American people. Along with the 92.15% of participants who gained a more favorable impression of Americans, 80.99% of the participants’ perceptions of the United States government grew more favorable.

⁴³ Performance Measurement Initiative. (2017, September). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/2016_performance_measurement_annual_report_final_september_2017_2.pdf. Evaluation Division: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Pg. 5

Table 3.1 Perceptions of the American People and the United States Government⁴⁴

	Much Less Favorable	Less Favorable	No Change	More Favorable	Much More Favorable
The American People	0.00%	2.89%	4.96%	44.63%	47.52%
The U.S. Government	0.41%	3.31%	15.29%	46.69%	34.30%

Table 4.1 portrays how participants rated their understanding of American culture and its context. Topics in this section included: daily life, freedom of speech and the press, religious and ethnic diversity, democracy, economy, values and culture, and voluntary community service. The table reflects how the participants felt regarding their change in understanding, which suggested that the rate was at least a moderate or substantial. The highest changes portrayed were in the Daily Life, Values and Culture, Voluntary Community Service, and Religious and Ethnic Diversity categories. Table 5.1 demonstrates how participants felt about their personal growth. The table shows that most participants felt that they “strongly agree” with many of the categories asked about.

Table 4.1 Understanding of American Values and Culture⁴⁵

	No Change	Minimal Change	Moderate Change	Substantial Change
Daily Life in the U.S.	0.41%	2.89%	30.99%	65.70%
Freedom of Speech and the Press in the U.S.	2.07%	9.50%	38.84%	49.59%
Religious and Ethnic Diversity in the U.S.	2.07%	7.85%	40.91%	49.17%
U.S. Democracy	3.72%	18.18%	45.45%	32.64%
U.S. Economy	3.72%	18.60%	60.33%	17.36%
U.S. Values and Culture	0.41%	7.02%	36.78%	55.79%
Voluntary Community Service in the U.S.	0.41%	4.96%	33.88%	60.74%

⁴⁴ Ibid. Pgs. 6-7.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Pgs. 8-11.

Table 5.1 Personal Growth⁴⁶

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I can have both a successful professional and family life	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	18.75%	81.25%
I feel I can influence people around me	1.32%	1.75%	2.63%	18.42%	75.44%
I feel I can make a difference at my place of work	1.84%	0.61%	2.45%	20.86%	72.39%
I feel I can make a difference at my school/university	2.56%	2.56%	0.00%	35.90%	57.26%
I feel I can make a difference in my community	1.32%	0.44%	3.07%	19.30%	75.00%
I feel I can make a difference in my country	0.00%	0.90%	4.50%	22.52%	72.07%
I feel I can make a difference in my family	1.54%	0.00%	1.54%	15.38%	81.54%
I feel I have many choices in my life	2.19%	0.88%	6.58%	28.95%	61.40%

Table 6.1 demonstrates how participants reflected on their experiences regarding leadership and network building. The table shows that most of the participants felt that they have become a greater leader as a result of their exchange program. This study, which contained a large sample size of participants, provided a general overview of how participants were impacted by their program through various categories. This study suggests that the overall impact of going on an exchange program was significant and beneficial to the lives of those who participated in this research.

Table 6.1 Leadership⁴⁷

	Not At All	To a Small Extent	To Some Extent	To a Great Extent	Not Applicable
Friends/Family	0.72%	0.72%	15.11%	83.45%	0.00%
School	0.85%	2.56%	32.48%	63.25%	0.85%
Workplace	0.00%	2.56%	27.35%	55.56%	14.53%
Community	0.85%	4.27%	36.75%	57.26%	0.85%

⁴⁶ Ibid. Pgs. 12-15.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pgs. 16-18.

4.1.1 *Overview of Global UGRAD*

The Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (Global UGRAD) is one of four U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs available for Central Asian students. Global UGRAD is administered through the IREX program and is operated by World Learning. The program offers scholarships to undergraduate students to study in the United States for one semester at an accredited four-year university or college, while participating in community engagement, and personal and professional development. As part of the program, the participants must take part in community service and gain cultural enrichment. Additionally, students receive intensive English language instruction if needed.⁴⁸ An estimated 2,000 students have participated in the Global UGRAD program since 2008. The aim of the program is for participants to utilize their experience in the United States to become “leaders in their professions and communities.”⁴⁹

4.1.2 *Overview of SUSI*

Another U.S.-sponsored academic exchange program for Central Asian citizens is the Study of the United States Institutes for Student Leaders (SUSI). The SUSI program is a 5-week United States-studies academic program hosted in the United States. The focus of the SUSI program is to “promote a better understanding of American people and institutions; explore the diversity and culture of the United States; and develop or expand curricula on United States studies in colleges and universities overseas”. The programs often consist of: intensive academic curriculums, community service projects, visits to educational and cultural sites, group travel to a

⁴⁸ Global Undergraduate Exchange Program Global UGRAD. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/global-undergraduate-exchange-program-global-ugrad>

⁴⁹ Global UGRAD. (n.d.). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://www.worldlearning.org/projects/global-ugrad/>

different region within the United States, and having opportunities to make connections with other American students and community members.

Each of the program themes are hosted by separate organizations within the United States. In 2017, the program topics featured the following themes: civic engagement, environmental issues, local, state, and federal public policy-making, religious pluralism in the United States, social entrepreneurship, United States history and government, and women's leadership. However, the only theme available for Central Asian SUSI participants is women's leadership at Green River College in Auburn, Washington. The SUSI Women's Leadership program focuses on the history and participation of women in public life in the United States.⁵⁰

4.1.3 *Overview of Fulbright*

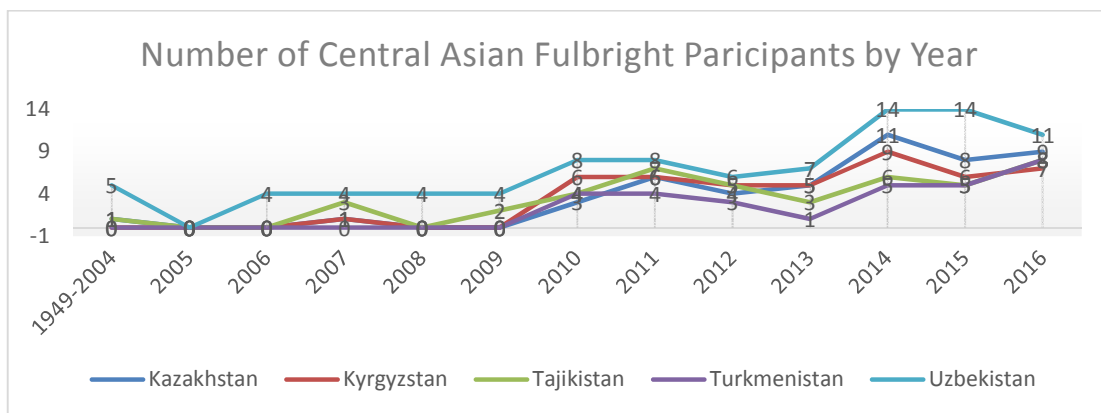
The third exchange program available for Central Asian students is Fulbright. There are two Fulbright programs currently available for students in Central Asia: the Fulbright Visiting Scholar program and the Fulbright Foreign Student program. The Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program offers grants to an estimated 850 scholars from around the globe to pursue post-doctoral research for a semester to a year at United States institutions, whereas the Fulbright Foreign Student Program provides opportunities for graduate students, young professionals, and artists from around the world to conduct research and study in the United States for one year or longer at a United States academic institution.⁵¹ The Fulbright Program is known for its impact on both the participants and their local communities. Often, Fulbright participants take what they have learned while abroad and continue to research it further or apply it towards follow-up projects

⁵⁰ Study US Institutes Student Leaders. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/study-us-institutes-student-leaders>

⁵¹ Fulbright Exchange Programs. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/fulbright-foreign-student-program>

directed towards improving their surrounding area. The effect compounds as they get community members involved, even those that they studied with abroad, and further the cultural understanding between communities.⁵²

According to reports published by Fulbright, 297 students from Central Asia received Fulbright grants to study in the United States between 1949 to 2016: 63 students from Kazakhstan, 52 students from Kyrgyzstan, 49 students from Tajikistan, 39 students from Turkmenistan, and 94 students from Uzbekistan. Fig. 3.1 portrays the number of Central Asian citizens who have participated in the Fulbright student program per year since its establishment in 1949. These numbers demonstrate that Uzbekistan, while following a similar trend as the other Central Asian Republics, has maintained a higher growth rate of its citizens participating in the Fulbright program. At the start of 2014, Kazakhstan saw a boom that placed it ahead of most of the other republics. Kyrgyzstan had no participation in the Fulbright until 2010; since then, Kyrgyzstan has been maintaining a steady pace. Both Tajikistan and Turkmenistan had numbers that fluctuated significantly. The years 1949-2004 in Fig. 3.1 are shown as one category since there was not any year by year data available on how many individuals participated in the Fulbright program during those years.



⁵² Fulbright Impact. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/fulbright-impact>

Figure 3.1 Number of Central Asian Fulbright Student Participants from 1949-2016⁵³

4.1.4 *Overview of FLEX*

The fourth and most popular exchange program in Central Asia is the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program. Administered by the United States Department of State and sponsored through the Freedom Support Act, the FLEX program was created in 1993 to provide international high-school students within the post-Soviet region the opportunity to spend an academic year in the United States while living with a host family and studying at a local high school. Since its establishment, more than 25,000 high school students have participated in the FLEX program.⁵⁴ The main goals of the program are to:

1. 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.
2. Show a willingness and a commitment to serve as agents for change in their countries after they return home.
3. Develop an appreciation for American culture.
4. Interact with Americans and generate enduring ties.
5. Teach Americans about the cultures of their home countries and teach citizens of their home countries about the United States.

At the state level, however, the FLEX program shares the same values as other United States-sponsored programs, 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.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Fulbright Report. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://eca.state.gov/fulbright/about-fulbright/j-william-fulbright-foreign-scholarship-board-ffsb/ffsb-reports>

⁵⁴ Future Leaders Exchanges (FLEX) Alumni Stories. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/future-leaders-exchange/alumni-stories>

⁵⁵ Assessment Of The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program. (2003, July). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/flex-final-report_july-2003.pdf

Initially, the program was designed for high school students from the former Soviet Union; however, the program has since altered its eligibility to include the following 17 countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine.⁵⁶ Table 7.1 demonstrates the total numbers of Central Asian students that participated in FLEX between 1993-2001.

Table 7.1 Total Number of High School Exchange Program (FLEX) Alumni 1993-2001⁵⁷

Countries:	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Numbers:	503	338	229	297	451

In 2000, it was reported that over 1,000 FLEX participants studying in the United States were from the former Soviet Union. Author David J. Mikosz states:

The number of FLEX participants from each Central Asian state varies. For example, [during the 2001] academic year 40 students were from Uzbekistan, while 45 came from Kazakhstan. ... In all, about 5,500 citizens of the former Soviet Union [were] studying in the United States on government--sponsored exchanges during the [2001] fiscal year. ... Over time, these exchanges have strengthened the social capital of former Soviet states. In the case of Central Asia, hundreds of program alumni have returned home and established strong new social networks. [As of 2001], there were over 8,000 young people in the FLEX alumni association.

According to Mikosz, “since 1998, the United States has launched a variety of initiatives to strengthen and expand alumni networks.” Parts of these initiatives included assigning alumni coordinators in the Central Asian regions the task of engaging with exchange participants. The various alumni coordinators combine their efforts to create events that build interest in going

⁵⁶ Future Leaders Exchanges (FLEX) Details. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/program/future-leaders-exchange/details>

⁵⁷ Mikosz, D. J. (2004). Academic Exchange Programs in Central Asia. In *The Challenges of Education in Central Asia* (pp. 113-125). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age Publishing. Pg. 121.

abroad while engaging the community alumni. They also encourage alumni to get involved in community action and public-sector work.

As a result of political tensions, the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan stopped participating in U.S.-sponsored exchange programs. A large factor in Russia's decision to withdraw was due to a 16-year-old student who sought asylum in the United States to escape persecution towards his sexual orientation. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, has not participated in U.S.-sponsored exchange programs because of their shift in relationships after 2005, despite their prior fully-established 10-year partnership (Mikosz, 2001).⁵⁸ In 2003, an assessment of the FLEX program was prepared by Aguirre International and submitted to the United States Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. According to this report, between the period of 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". The assessment found that the FLEX program was meeting its initial goals of "encouraging new attitudes, values, and practices that support market reform and the growth of democratic institutions", and that it has maintained a significantly positive impact on the lives of its participants.⁵⁹

In 2003, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs formally evaluated the FLEX program and encountered the following findings: in the category of "Understanding of Democracy and Civil Society," FLEX alumni are "more likely to believe a Western-style democracy would be better for their country than the current political system, prefer democracy over strong leadership in their own countries and to disagree with the use of force, and during their year in the United States, 55% of alumni participated in student government"; in another

⁵⁸ Mikosz, D. (2001, March 06). Exchange Programs Having Quiet Impact in Central Asia.

⁵⁹ Assessment of the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program. (2003, July). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/flex-final-report_july-2003.pdf

category, “Development of Enduring Ties,” “almost all alumni (95%) made formal presentations about their home countries while in the United States, many alumni (80%) maintain contact with their host families and other FLEX participants while 75% of alumni are still in contact with classmates or friends they met in the United States.”⁶⁰

The overall goal of 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”; given that the FLEX program has significant Central Asian student participation and is proven to be successfully meeting its goals through this assessment, the Central Asian FLEX participants, in some capacity, are: acquiring an understanding of important elements of civil society, showing willingness and commitment to promote change in their native countries, developing an appreciation for American culture, have interacted with Americans and have created connections, and lastly, have taught Americans about their culture and have taught citizens back home about American culture.

As these students are still of high school age when they participate in the FLEX program, it enables them to take their experience and use it to shape how they choose to grow and influence the world around them. Due to the program’s strong alumni activities, these students have a propensity to engage in community events, volunteer, and use their newfound knowledge to encourage others to do the same. In addition to meeting Americans, the participants often have the opportunity to interact with other students from around the globe during their program. The bond that they gain through these global connections also helps to support them as they attempt to become more influential. Taking that into consideration, the FLEX program is likely to have

⁶⁰ Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX) Evaluation Summary. (2003, September 10). Retrieved June 01, 2017, from https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/flex-one-pager_sept-2003.pdf

an extremely positive influence on intracultural relations between post-soviet states and the United States.⁶¹

4.2 ONLINE CENTRAL ASIAN ALUMNI STORIES

While researching information about U.S.-sponsored exchange programs online, I came across various alumni stories that were published either by the Department of State or the exchange organization. All of the stories feature a former exchange participant reflecting on their experience abroad. These stories, while mainly used for demonstrating the success of the exchange program and as a resource for prospective applicants, are helpful in capturing the impact the exchange has had on its participants. Most of these stories hail from the Green River College SUSI website and the FLEX Department of State website. Only two stories are available on the Fulbright Department of State website. No alumni stories were published online for the Global UGRAD program.

4.2.1 *SUSI Alumni Stories*

Green River College has been leading the SUSI program for Central Asian students since 2007. The SUSI page published by Green River College features 13 success stories of their Central Asian SUSI alumni.⁶² Of the 13 stories available, only 3 featured direct quotes from the participants themselves. Rukhshona, one of the alumni from Tajikistan who participated in the 2014 Green River College SUSI program, spoke about her exchange experience:

This program had a great impact on my well-being. I became more open minded, stronger and improved my leadership skills and public speaking. Thanks to the SUSI program, during the short time we all became so close. We became a big

⁶¹ Assessment Of The Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program. (2003, July). Retrieved June 1, 2017, from https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/flex-final-report_july-2003.pdf

⁶² Alumni Spotlight. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <http://www.greenriver.edu/leadership/alumni/alumni-spotlight.htm>

SUSI family. It makes my heart warm. But important thing is the leadership lessons about how to see myself and others in a way which avoids conflict – and it really helps me in my marital life. Still keeping my heart at peace. If you remember I told you that we were planning to organize A Model United Nations conference, which was held at the National Museum of Tajikistan on July 30. The conference topic was ‘No to extremism!’ We tried to organize it at a high level. The Ambassador of the United States to Tajikistan, Susan Elliott, spoke at the event. It was a great experience.

Another 2014 SUSI program alumna from Kazakhstan, Akmaral S., stated:

To be honest, my life has completely changed after SUSI 2014. I have set up my life goal and am working on it very hard. Basically, life has taught me many things, and gave an opportunity to meet with lifelong SUSI friends with whom I am meeting at Women Deliver Conference next week, in Copenhagen, Denmark. Overall, I have once again highlighted that (it is) not places that change people, but people are the ones who change each other.

Within the page that featured Akmaral’s quote, Green River College also included a description on her accomplishments after completing the SUSI program; Akmaral has:

- Moderated the Model U.N. Commission on the Status of Women committee in KIIT University in Bhubaneshwar India, and held sessions for 60 students on women’s empowerment issues.
- Organized leadership sessions at Miras University in Shymkent, Kazakhstan, and announced SUSI benefits and opportunities to freshmen and junior students.
- Completed an internship at U.N. Population Fund Country Office in Almaty, Kazakhstan, working with student-journalists on gender based violence and objectification of women in media topics.
- Attended an advocacy workshop in Bulgaria on reproductive health and rights of women.
- Won a scholarship to attend and moderate Rome Model U.N. Economic and Social Council, assisted Ambassador of Pakistan during the sessions in Rome, Italy in 2015.
- Completed a university degree in Social Development
- Received a fellowship from the U.N. Population Fund Eastern Europe and Central Asian office in Istanbul to study at Peer Education Training and Research Institute in Bulgaria for 4.5 months, focused on learning special methods in creating and facilitating trainings on any subject.

The list of Akmaral’s achievements indicates that the SUSI exchange program empowered her to pursue a variety of other rewarding events and activities. Lastly, another Green River College 2014 SUSI alumni from Kazakhstan, Mariyam, shared her experience as a participant:

I can certainly tell that SUSI has changed my life a lot! I have dedicated myself actively to the development of student life at Nazarbayev University while I was

Vice-President of Student Government, I founded a student club, Ladies in Fellowship Together, which aims to develop leadership and professional and intellectual abilities of female students taking into account Kazakhstani culture and language. We are doing interesting workshops and inviting great speakers to share their experiences with us. Also, we have subgroup within this club, which aims to develop servant leadership. We visited house for people with disabilities, and we are planning to work with the homeless.⁶³

Each of the program participants were required to develop a social-service follow-on project in their home country in order to apply what they had learned within the program. Green River also provided information on follow-on projects that were completed by Central Asian participants.

Table 8.1 portrays the participant’s names, year they participated in the SUSI program and the service project they implemented; this information is directly quoted from Green River College’s alumni spotlight page.

Table 8.1 SUSI Service Projects⁶⁴

Name	Country	Year	Project Implemented
Nasiba	Tajikistan	2016	Organized a three-day seminar called “Learn More and Teach Others” for 25 female students at her university in a project titled “Week of Motivation”.
Nagima	Kyrgyzstan	2016	Led a week of leadership and teambuilding training for 30 high school students from her hometown.
Latofat	Tajikistan	2016	Organized the “I Have a Dream” project to train and inspired 15 student leaders from Khujand, Tajikistan.
Sitora	Tajikistan	2016	Organized the “I Have a Dream” project to train and inspired 15 student leaders from Khujand, Tajikistan.
Aiperi	Kyrgyzstan	2016	Developed a project to help students identify the best-fit university for their career goals to combat high levels of unemployment in her country.
Ulnas	Kyrgyzstan	2015	Visited seven rural high schools located outside the city of Naryn and conducted human rights trainings for approximately 20 students in each school.
Aigerim	Kazakhstan	2015	Created a campaign to establish a free second-hand shop for people in need in her hometown.
Aitegin	Kyrgyzstan	2015	Organized a mini SUSI program for young men and women in her home country.

⁶³ Alumni Spotlight. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <http://www.greenriver.edu/leadership/alumni/alumni-spotlight.htm>

⁶⁴ Follow-On Projects. (n.d.). Retrieved June 02, 2017, from <http://www.greenriver.edu/leadership/alumni/follow-on-projects.htm>

Kankey	Kyrgyzstan	2015	Organized a series of community sessions to educate community members on the subject of promoting awareness and understanding of American culture.
Munisa	Uzbekistan	2015	Organized “U2,” a short-term service learning project to empower young people with disabilities.

4.2.2 *FLEX Alumni Stories*

Since 2012, FLEX has been publishing alumni spotlights with descriptions of where the alumni are originally from and when they had participated in their program. There are currently 19 alumni stories available on the Department of State’s website for the FLEX program. All of these stories contain descriptions of how the alumni have been successful in their program. Of the 19 FLEX alumni stories, 5 are from Kazakhstan, 9 are from Kyrgyzstan, 1 is from Tajikistan, 4 are from Turkmenistan, and none are from Uzbekistan. Table 9.1 provides an overview of my summary and perception of the common themes mentioned throughout each alumni story. As is depicted in the Table 9.1, 16 out of 19 FLEX alumni made reference to their participation in extracurricular activities, such as clubs and sports. As participation in a service project is a component of the FLEX program, it is no surprise that 12 out of 19 alumni referred back to their volunteer experience when discussing their experience with FLEX. Other themes mentioned include sharing culture, adjusting to the American school system, having new perspectives, and living with a host family.

Table 9.1 FLEX Participant Themes

Name	Country	Common Themes
Anna	Kazakhstan	Living with host family ⁶⁵
Yerasyl	Kazakhstan	Extracurricular activities, the American school system ⁶⁶

⁶⁵ FLEX Student of the Month — October 2012. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-october-2012>

⁶⁶ Creating Change for the Disabled. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/creating-change-disabled>

Dana	Kazakhstan	Extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community, sharing culture ⁶⁷
Symbat	Kazakhstan	Extracurricular activities, sharing culture, volunteering in the community ⁶⁸
Anel	Kazakhstan	Extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community ⁶⁹
Bermet	Kyrgyzstan	Volunteering in the community ⁷⁰
Kamila	Kyrgyzstan	Extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community ⁷¹
Azat	Kyrgyzstan	Extracurricular activities, new perspective ⁷²
Binazir	Kyrgyzstan	Host family, extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community ⁷³
Sanira-Begim	Kyrgyzstan	Extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community ⁷⁴
Aleksandr	Kyrgyzstan	Extracurricular activities ⁷⁵
Zhyldyz	Kyrgyzstan	Volunteering in the community, sharing culture, extracurricular activities ⁷⁶
Zhanna	Kyrgyzstan	Extracurricular activities, volunteering in the community ⁷⁷
Nadezdha	Kyrgyzstan	Volunteering in the community ⁷⁸
Gavharkhon	Tajikistan	Volunteering in the community, sharing culture, extracurricular activities ⁷⁹
Gulnar	Turkmenistan	Volunteering in the community, sharing culture, extracurricular activities ⁸⁰

⁶⁷ FLEX Student of the Month – January 2015. (2015, March 09). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-january-2015>

⁶⁸ FLEX Student of the Month – November 2015. (2016, March 10). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-november-2015>

⁶⁹ FLEX Student of the Month –February 2016. (2016, April 01). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-february-2016>

⁷⁰ FLEX Student of the Month – March 2015. (2015, April 30). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-march-2015>

⁷¹ FLEX Student of the Month – October 2014. (2014, November 18). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-october-2014>

⁷² FLEX Student of the Month — November 2013. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-november-2013>

⁷³ Part of the Family. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/part-family>

⁷⁴ FLEX Student of the Month — November 2012. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-november-2012>

⁷⁵ A New Generation of FLEX Arrives in the United States. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/new-generation-flex-arrives-united-states>

⁷⁶ FLEX Student of the Month – May 2014. (2014, August 13). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-may-2014>

⁷⁷ FLEX Student of the Month: May 2016. (2016, June 03). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-may-2016>

⁷⁸ Shaping the Future of the Kyrgyz Republic. (2016, November 07). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/alumni-story/shaping-future-kyrgyz-republic>

⁷⁹ FLEX Student of the Month – February 2014. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-february-2014>

⁸⁰ FLEX Student of the Month – March 2014. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-march-2014>

Anastasiya	Turkmenistan	Extracurricular activities ⁸¹
Diana	Turkmenistan	Extracurricular activities ⁸²
Jennet	Turkmenistan	Extracurricular activities ⁸³

The descriptions associated with each alumni story had extremely similar content. A reason for such related themes could be a result of the alumni having answered questions that encouraged them to answer on a specific topic. However, when alumni stories featured direct quotes from participants, the themes discussed shifted away from extracurricular activities and volunteering, to focusing more on personal experiences with sharing culture, implementing leadership projects, and living with a host family.

One of the primary themes presented within the quotes was the participant’s dedication to sharing their native culture within their American community. Many of the descriptions associated with this theme portray participants giving cultural presentations for fellow students and community members, taking the knowledge they acquired about American culture and sharing it with community members in their home country.^{84 85 86} Other participants mentioned that they felt as if they were an ambassador of their country.⁸⁷ Yerasyl made specific mention of his role as an exchange student from Kazakhstan:

I learned new things that changed me. Because I was a student ambassador, lots of students were interested in knowing about my country. I wore cultural clothing and did presentations in order to share my culture. I was required to do 20 hours

⁸¹ FLEX Student of the Month – February 2015. (2015, April 30). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-february-2015>

⁸² FLEX Student of the Month – May 2015. (2015, July 01). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-may-2015>

⁸³ FLEX Student of the Month – March 2016. (2016, April 04). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-march-2016>

⁸⁴ FLEX Student of the Month – May 2015. (2015, July 01). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-may-2015>

⁸⁵ FLEX Student of the Month – March 2014. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-march-2014>

⁸⁶ FLEX Student of the Month – February 2014. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-february-2014>

⁸⁷ FLEX Student of the Month — October 2012. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-october-2012>

of community service and I did over 100 hours. I worked at the Salvation Army in the community kitchen and fed homeless people. In Kazakhstan, it is not that common for people to volunteer so it was a new experience for me. I noticed in America that disabled students were studying side-by-side with other students. It is not like that in Kazakhstan, so disabled students don't get to interact. Disabled people were always in those positions but I never thought about it. When I came back to my home I joined the online community in Kazakhstan. One project that we have done is recording the conditions of the facilities of the disabled people and posting it on social media. Since I returned I am doing an internship with the NGO Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia. I am working on social issues and helping with unemployment among youth. This experience totally changed my opinion about different things in life. When I came here I realized that things can be better and that I can make a difference. We all can work together and make a difference.⁸⁸

Other reoccurring themes dealt with the participant's experience of implementing service projects, with examples ranging from facilitating meal deliveries to the elderly in Kyrgyzstan⁸⁹ to networking with other FLEX alumni to an organization that "finds fun ways for youth to volunteer in their communities."⁹⁰ In Jennet's alumni story, she had mentioned, "My FLEX goal is to share love and help others. As an exchange student from Turkmenistan, I share with these awesome teenagers my love and help. Encouraging them at their game helped our team to take home awards. Volunteering is to help, to learn and to meet new people. Thank you very much ASSE and the FLEX program for such opportunities."⁹¹ Anel characterizes her experiences with volunteering by stating, "...it was an opportunity to talk to wise people, take care of those people who did a lot for us, and to say thank you, on behalf of the future generation."⁹²

⁸⁸ Creating Change for the Disabled. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/creating-change-disabled>

⁸⁹ FLEX Student of the Month – May 2014. (2014, August 13). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-may-2014>

⁹⁰ Shaping the Future of the Kyrgyz Republic. (2016, November 07). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/alumni-story/shaping-future-kyrgyz-republic>

⁹¹ FLEX Student of the Month – March 2016. (2016, April 04). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-march-2016>

⁹² FLEX Student of the Month –February 2016. (2016, April 01). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-february-2016>

Similarly, Azat’s FLEX experience gave him a new perspective on the rights of people with disabilities, as student with a disability. Azat states, “I cannot imagine what my life would be like if not for the FLEX program.” He claims that the FLEX program “enhanced his entrepreneurial drive, communications skills, interest in foreign affairs, and desire to give back to his community.” As a result, Azat manages programs that aim to help people with disabilities live life the way they want to. He also actively campaigns for gender rights. Thanks to his efforts, Azat received multiple grants to create the “Future Leaders in the Making” program and to plan a Global Youth Service Day named “Disabilities Do Not Limit Possibilities.” The service day led to Azat’s university addressing their accessibility issues and becoming the first accessible university in Kyrgyzstan. “Future Leaders in the Making” aims to teach 15 female high school students skills in leadership, advocacy and several other areas while also focusing on gender equality. Those students will then take those skills and share them with those around them, similar to the after effects of an exchange program. Azat claims that the FLEX program gave him the confidence and compassion to improve his community and openly discuss his concerns.⁹³

The third most common theme that was depicted in direct quotes from the alumni stories was in regards to living with a host family and adapting to American culture. Binazir grew up as an only child in Kyrgyzstan. When she learned that she was going to have eight host siblings, she thought she would have difficulty fitting in with the family. To her surprise, the opposite happened. Binazir stated, “It will be a little bit difficult to go back to being an only child. It is never quiet in the house, which is really good, because you never get bored.” Regarding her experience, Binazir commented, “This year has been one of the best years of my life. It has not

⁹³ FLEX Student of the Month — November 2013. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/flex-student-month-november-2013>

been perfect and was sometimes difficult, but it helped to know I could always talk to my host family. I learned you can't be understood if you don't express yourself or ask for help when you need it." When asked about her proudest moment with the FLEX program, Binazir answered, "It was when my host mother told me I was a good host daughter and she felt like I have always been a part of the family." Binazir also offered advice to new FLEX students "Be open-minded, [and] don't be scared of new and different things [because] they can turn out to be great!"⁹⁴

Another alumnus, Aleksandr, spent a year in Oregon during his FLEX program. Regarding his expectations and assimilation to American culture, Aleksandr stated, "I actually imagined a big city like New York with skyscrapers, wide streets, traffic, and shopping malls everywhere. But in reality, my town is just a regular town with 20,000 people. People here are really nice, my family and my school are great. I've met a lot of people and learned a lot about American culture and the way Americans live." In his story, Aleksandr commented, "I really like to explore new things and this program is one of the best opportunities to learn something new. America is really different from other countries and just the way Americans live their lives is unique. This was the main reason to apply for the FLEX Program, so I could try to understand American culture and how people live here."⁹⁵

4.2.3 *Fulbright Alumni Stories*

The Fulbright website only featured two stories from previous participants from Central Asia. The first is Nodirjon S. from Uzbekistan, who came to New York in 2009 to study computer science. Nodirjon mentions that two of the most surprising aspects of his exchange

⁹⁴ Part of the Family. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/part-family>

⁹⁵ A New Generation of FLEX Arrives in the United States. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/new-generation-flex-arrives-united-states>

were the American food culture and the American education system. He discusses how he struggled at first adapting to the academic fast-paced culture; however, he explained that over time, he became more aware of “academic dishonesty policies, the importance of interacting with faculty members, and setting career objectives while studying in school”. Nodirjon states, “I now start to think ‘outside of the box,’ approach problems from different angles, and communicate with people more openly.” Nodirjon credits the Fulbright program for making him more comfortable with pursuing his goals and causing him to have “open-mindedness and persistence”. He states, “You will only learn about a new culture by getting involved with local people.”⁹⁶

The second alumni story featured on the Fulbright website was about Samagan A. from Kyrgyzstan. Samagan came to the University of Washington in 2010 to study communications and journalism. Samagan states, “I was lucky to study and get empowered by the innovative atmosphere of the digital community in Seattle, Washington, named by tech experts the next Silicon Valley. [The] culture of American entrepreneurship ignited in me many new ideas of making [a] difference in a society by proper application of technologies.” After he returned home, he became the Director of the Development for the Central Asian News Service Public Foundation, an organization that produces digital journalism in Central Asia. In May 2013, Samagan created a conference that focused on utilizing technology to enhance peace building methods called Generation Peace: New Media Technologies for Central Asia. Samagan explained, “Connections with the vibrant Fulbright community inspired me to launch the Generation Peace Project. Its purpose is to raise new generations of leaders who can promote peace and justice in conflict-prone, multi-ethnic regions using new media technologies.” He has

⁹⁶ Discovering American Culture. (2016, July 19). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://exchanges.state.gov/non-us/story/discovering-american-culture>

taken part in many community investment projects as a part of several exchange alumni service projects including repairing orphanages, updating buildings to be more accessible to the disabled and adding bike racks across his community.⁹⁷

4.2.4 *Analysis of Alumni Stories*

After reviewing these stories, it became apparent that there were various reoccurring themes associated with the alumni stories. Most of the themes were specific to the program and not the country; additionally, there were several overlapping themes that were associated with all three programs. Participants from the SUSI program made frequent comments regarding their experience with service projects and being empowered to promote change. For the FLEX program, most of the alumni referred to their participation in extracurricular activities and volunteer work, their experience establishing service projects, their host family life, as well as having the opportunity to share their culture with the local community. The themes related to the Fulbright program involved their difficulty assimilating with the U.S. academic system and integrating into American culture. When discussing their experience further, the alumni from all three programs often made references to leadership, keeping an open-mind, being empowered to facilitate change, being involved in volunteer work, and creating service projects. Table 10.1 demonstrates the variance in themes portrayed throughout the overview of alumni stories. While comparing the patterns, it became evident that the following four themes were shared by all three programs: creating service projects, participating in volunteer work, keeping an open-mind, and being involved in leadership. These shared themes are a result of the similarity of purpose and structure for U.S.-sponsored exchanges.

⁹⁷ New Media: The Final Frontier. (2016, November 07). Retrieved December 03, 2017, from <https://alumni.state.gov/alumni-story/new-media-final-frontier>

Table 10.1 Reoccurring Themes in Alumni Stories

FLEX 19 Stories	Fulbright (2 Stories)	(SUSI 13 Stories)
Leadership	Leadership	Leadership
Volunteering	Volunteering	Volunteering
Service Project	Service Project	Service Project
Open-Minded	Open-Minded	Open-Minded
Extracurricular Activities	U.S. Academic System	Life-long Friends
Host Family Life	American Culture	Life-Changing
Sharing Culture	Getting Empowered	Organizing Events

4.3 INTERVIEWS WITH CENTRAL ASIAN ALUMNI

The in-depth interviews with program alumni provided the opportunity to contextualize the patterns present in academic exchanges. I was able to interview three FLEX participants: Nessie K., Anar K., and Batima, M.; three SUSI participants: Nigora B., Zhanna L., and Mukaddaskhon T.; and three Fulbright participants: Gulshat M., Asel D., and Aniyar I., all of which were or currently are participants of a U.S.-sponsored academic exchange program. In my conversations with the participants, I gained perspective on which aspects of an exchange program they valued more. I analyzed their responses during the interviews to find reoccurring key terms. In reviewing the participants' verbal portrayal of their experience, I noticed several trends that were previously discussed in the literature about the impact of academic exchanges.

4.3.1 *Interviews with Fulbright Participants*

Gulshat is a Fulbright student from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan who is currently pursuing a master's in non-profit management at the University of Oregon. Gulshat's first U.S.-sponsored exchange program was a short-U. S. intensive internship program and the second was being part of a Junior Faculty Development program. She began her third exchange program with Fulbright in March 2016, and was initially sent to the American English Institute to improve her English speaking and writing skills prior to beginning her master's program at a U.S. university. While

interviewing Gulshat, she was eager to discuss various elements of the Fulbright program, including the application process and the program structure. A majority of the conversation included positive experiences; Gulshat mentioned that the only aspect she would change is to make the exchange programs longer. Her reasoning for this was that on average, exchange programs were too short to learn much about the United States “or to learn about the field you’re in.”

While describing her program progress, she frequently reflected on her experience participating in a subsequent program. During her Fulbright program, Gulshat received a competitive internship in New York through the E. Muskie Internship program, which is another U.S.-sponsored exchange program. As she was comparing her participation in an exchange program in New York versus Oregon, she commented that there were significant differences between the two and that by participating in both programs, she was able to witness two immensely different American lifestyles. This allowed her to witness the differences in American culture on both sides of the United States.

When asked about her thoughts on attending the University of Oregon for her Fulbright program, Gulshat mentioned:

It’s all about being in a diverse culture. And meeting a lot of NEW people.
And, it’s an eye-opening program. ...
And also, what I’ve learned is being open-minded towards different challenges.
You will learn that EVERYTHING has a solution.
So, I don’t know, it’s... I mean it’s A LOT of new experiences.
New academic life.
Everything is COMPLETELY different than in your country.
And also, you learn how to live a life [away] from your family.

Additionally, she mentioned that her particular master’s program is valuable because it is very interactive and has enjoyed gaining practical experience through her program. On the other hand,

Gulshat stated that the most challenging aspect of her exchange program was adjusting to the American academic culture:

I think the most challenging experience for every student, NO MATTER if you're an international student or a local student, [is]... FINALS WEEK.
... Here in the United States, you write a lot of papers; like every single class requires writing papers.
I mean it's challenging but at the same time, you learn A LOT of things and you develop writing skills.
And I think it's a good challenge that you face as a student at the university and especially if you're a grad student...
the requirements are a little bit higher.
So, you have to match that. You have to meet the standards, I guess...
In the beginning, it was CHALLENGING.
So, I was a little bit intimidated by the academic environment of the United States.

Regarding her overall experience with Fulbright, Gulshat stated:

It's been a GREAT experience for me.
I'm so grateful to be a Fulbrighter.
And it gives you the chance to explore a university in the United States.
It also gives you a chance to share your own culture, which is I think very important.
It gives you the opportunity to identify your future goals ...
[Such as] what you want to do after... Where do you want to see yourself?...
and I think the most enjoyable part is just being a grad student at a United States university, because the education system of [the United States] and in my country [Kyrgyzstan], is completely DIFFERENT.
Being an international student, in a very diverse culture, it's a great opportunity...
And also meeting new people, making new friends, meeting old friends...
It's priceless.
And I value EVERY SINGLE moment of my time being in the United States and being a Fulbrighter.

When asked how exchanges impact her home country, Gulshat discussed the importance of exchange programs and how they are necessary for combatting corruption in the government:

Exchange programs [are] very important because I think at this time, my country needs a lot of professional people.
Let it be in the government, business work, [or] nonprofit organizations...
I believe that these exchange programs... they help A LOT.
To strengthen your skills.
Your understanding of the world.

And of course, [they] sharpen your knowledge in the field that you are in. And, at the end of the [program], you come back to your country and you're going to use all this gained knowledge in [your] organization. ... So I think my country will gain a lot of positive things from the exchange programs that are supported by the U.S. government or [by] European countries or other scholarship programs. These are VERY important programs.⁹⁸

Asel is another Fulbright participant from Kyrgyzstan who is currently pursuing her master's in Comparative and International Education at Columbia University. During the interview, Asel commented that her Fulbright experience provided her with "full academic freedom," as it offered her the option to select her own courses and choose her own challenges. Asel also mentioned that several highlights of the program include, "being exposed to millions of cultures," "getting to know a lot of like-minded, diverse, kind, and generous people," "learning to become more open minded, tolerant and responsible not only for yourself or for your country, but responsible for the whole world," and "being [a] cultural ambassador of your home country in the U.S., as well as when you're back educating people at home about the U.S. values."

Before starting her Fulbright program, Asel worked for the U.S. Peace Corps in Kyrgyzstan as well as American Councils. She stated that while she had been exposed to American culture through her professional experience, she had never studied at a university similar to Columbia:

The first semester was challenging, I would say. I didn't know exactly what my professors would expect from me. Academic writing: I did not have this skill. So, I had to learn it here. I learned to not be afraid of making mistakes and being wrong in front of OTHER ambitious students. ... So... Academically, you'll grow as a researcher. And, I think another great experience is when [you] have full control of what you're interested in what you want to do and no one is holding your hand in your own task, which is actually liberating and challenging at the same time. And... As for going back and working for my country, I ABSOLUTELY want to give back and try to have a more of an impact than before coming here.

⁹⁸ Interview with Gulshat M. was conducted on December 4, 2017.

While discussing benefits of the Fulbright program, Asel stated, “Being here I had an opportunity to... look at my own country from another perspective. And... Of course, when you are exposed to another culture, you grow and obtain knowledge, learn new skills, you go back and you see what else could be done that already works in another country... and not only in the U.S. but also in many other countries that you meet people from.”⁹⁹

Another Fulbright participant I interviewed was Aniyar, who is pursuing a master’s degree in Public Health at the University of Washington. Aniyar’s favorite aspects of the Fulbright program include gaining cultural enrichment and gaining friends from study groups:

We have a study group [of] friends of about ten people who spend a lot of time together. They helped me VERY MUCH in adjusting to culture and to learn new things.

So, these are probably two of the most enjoyable things so far. ... My study group friends ... they helped me very much to adjust to American culture.

Sometimes, you know even the like... American slang words that I heard ... they might explain that word. So, like some cultural sayings.

We had a Friendsgiving dinner; we all went to tailgating. So, these are things I had never experienced before.

They always invite me to these kind of events and that’s helping me very much.

Aniyar mentioned that he was expecting his academic program to be more challenging than it is.

Aniyar attributes his adjustment to U.S. university life to the Fulbright pre-departure orientation.

The orientation gave him the opportunity to travel to Reno, Nevada to meet other Fulbright participants, fifteen of which were also going to the University of Washington for their program.

Aniyar states, “We all traveled together. And by the time we arrived to Seattle we already knew each other. That was really helpful. So we were experiencing the same kind of problems. You know tasks upon arrival like: opening bank accounts, going and talking to fiscal services, etc. So, we were dealing with those problems all together and being in contact quite frequently.”

⁹⁹Interview with Asel D. was conducted on December 22, 2017.

Aniyar stated that adjusting to the U.S. academic system has been challenging, since U.S. universities tend to have a different grading system and require weekly homework assignments, quizzes, and exams. However, he also discussed how this program has given him insight into what his career path should be:

I didn't think about [my career path] before coming here. NOW I'm thinking about these kinds of things because healthcare is for the public health field, which is now just starting to develop in Kazakhstan.

Without coming here, ... I wouldn't be exposed to these kind of new topics, which are important ...

And I think it's REALLY important for the future of Kazakhstan because a lot of problems which were experienced by the U.S. healthcare and public health system 20 to 30 years ago are now being experienced in Kazakhstan.

So, kind of ... moving ahead in the future, my expertise and the things that I'm learning right now will be really helpful I think.

Even when I talk to my colleagues or friends back in Kazakhstan, they're like, "This sounds really good. This is something that we never think about in Kazakhstan. We are constantly focusing on completely different things right now."

And that that's fine. But in the future, we'll experience the same problems and we'll have to deal with them. And well, I would rather have expertise from someone that you know ... in the U.S. who got professional training in that field will be really helpful, I think for folks in Kazakhstan.

When asked what he would change about the Fulbright program, Aniyar commented that he would want the Fulbright program to obtain more funding in order for people from Kazakhstan to have more opportunities of studying in the United States and that he wished that Fulbright participants had more of a voice in selecting which university to study at in the United States.¹⁰⁰

The Fulbright interviewee's experiences similarly reflected the experiences of the two alumni stories featured on Fulbright's website. In comparison with Nodirjon and Samagan's stories, the interviewees focused on the following patterns: being-open minded, the challenges of the U.S. academic system, and overall experience with American culture. Unlike the two other online stories, the interviewees also often referenced subsequent programs, having the

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Aniyar I. was conducted on December 22, 2017.

opportunity to meet new people, obtaining academic freedom, as well as gaining professional and practical experience.

4.3.2 *Interviews with FLEX Participants*

Nessie was the second of three sisters to participate in the FLEX program. In 2010, she left her home in Kazakhstan to live with a family in Gainesville, Florida to study at a local American high school for an entire academic year. Similar to Gulshat, Nessie was eager to explain how the FLEX program worked and how she became involved:

Actually, my sister participated in this program and the way my sister found out about it was really funny because my mom was a doctor...
... [On the] third round of FLEX you have to fill out the... medical application. Someone approached my mom and asked her to do the check-up for [their] daughter and sign that she has received her certain vaccinations.
[My mom] asked, "What kind of program is this?" And this woman told her about this program.
And my sister was she was younger at that age and they were preparing for like a GOOD YEAR. And then she applied [the] next year.
And she passed and she lived in Pennsylvania from 2006-2007.
So after that, it was pretty much my goal.
I always dreamt of following my sister's steps and going to the United States.
I was studying English.
[I] went to classes.
[I] participated [in the FLEX program] when I was in 9th grade.

In addition to being a participant herself, Nessie has also worked for American Councils for International Education and maintained the role of recruiting students for the program. From her professional experience, Nessie states, "I notice that people really change in a year. I interview [the students] a year ago and [then] they go to the U.S. and they [come back] like absolutely different people." While the application process for FLEX is extremely rigorous, Nessie also mentioned that many schools in Kazakhstan are supportive of the program and encourage all of their students to apply.

While recalling her memories of her FLEX program, Nessie frequently referenced her experiences living with an American family:

It was actually really great because my host family ...promised themselves [that it's] not just an experience for us BUT it's an experience for them.
They wanted to go and do stuff at least once a month.
Go out of Gainesville and do stuff.
So, we visited a couple of national parks in Florida. We went to visit family in North Carolina; so, we drove through Gainesville to Georgia, South Carolina.
Went apple picking in North Carolina, which was really fun.
We went to my host sister's graduation in Michigan.
The most ENJOYABLE part ... was spending time with my host family.
They are really nice people and I am actually visiting them in January, in a month.
They're great. ... I remember on Christmas day and my host Dad's family came to visit and we were just playing cards and singing songs. And eating.
It was A LOT of fun.

Her most rewarding experience in the FLEX program was her participation in her culinary class. She explained that her high school had a large culinary department and that one of the chefs took her on, despite not having as much as experience as her peers. As the team's food carver, she was given the opportunity to compete in cooking competitions throughout Florida and as such, had made fond memories bonding with her team mates.

On the other hand, the most challenging experience for her was adapting to the American school system. As one of the few international students at an American high school, Nessie felt that starting at an American school was "really tough." As part of her first day, she mentioned:

There was a fight in my second class. ...Two guys fought in the class.
And then there was the lunch. ...I didn't know where to sit... and I was standing outside. Because it's Florida, all of the lunch tables are outside.
I was trying to find a place to sit and I just sat with two random people and I was like, "hey guys, can I sit with you?"
And they were like, "OK." And they didn't talk to me for the whole lunch time.
They were just talking with each other.
It was REALLY tough.
[That's what the] first month was like.
That's why when I was recruiting [for the FLEX program], I was trying to make sure that the ... students don't have this idea that they're gonna come and [they're] going to be like super popular girls and stuff like that.

...School is the BIGGEST challenge.

I was really lucky to have a super supportive host family because if my host family wouldn't [have been] as supportive, I would have probably gone back home.

School sucked A LOT until I found friends.

Regarding other challenging experiences, Nessie mentioned that adjusting to the American style of friendship was difficult. To her, friendship meant something entirely different in Kazakh culture. She stated that even though she was provided information about American culture in her departure orientation, she was surprised with how American students approached friendship:

In Kazakhstan, if you call someone a friend, it means A LOT.

...You don't call ANYONE your friends.

There's a [another] word: acquaintance, and we call EVERYONE acquaintance.

But you have like maybe 10 friends.

And here in the U.S., everyone you know, like even if you barely know him...

he's still your friend.

And that's was something really hard to get used to.

Because, it would be the people who would say, "Oh let's hang out tomorrow," and then tomorrow NEVER COMES.

In Kazakhstan, if someone's says, "Let's hang out tomorrow," you're probably going to hang out tomorrow. Because THAT'S THE PLAN.

And here, they will say, "Oh, let's go to the movies! Or... let's do that, it'll be so much fun!"

And then they totally forget about you.

So that was really tough to get used to...

Then you kind of get used to it...

Nessie also discussed her day-to-day experiences in the program of volunteering and participating in extracurricular activities, such as: culinary team, tennis club, Key club, etc.

Since returning to Kazakhstan, Nessie continued her involvement in volunteering by becoming a student representative in her community, where she facilitated various volunteer projects. She mentioned that she is one of many FLEX alumni in her country who have had this experience in the United States. She states that it is common for individuals in Kazakhstan to discuss their FLEX experience, "People talk about FLEX all the time to be honest and people get tired of that A LOT. [They'll say], "Hey I did FLEX! Did you?" and then they'll start chatting

and then people who [have not participated in a FLEX program] are like, “Oh, I'm so tired of FLEX people.” While reflecting on her experience overall, Nessie stated:

The biggest takeaway from this was that I became MUCH MORE confident. Because... it's a really challenging experience. Apart from it being an amazing experience, it's also super super challenging. It's probably ONE OF THE MOST challenging things I've been through. And you kind of come back And you know that you possibly can do anything because [of what] you've gone through... You're 15... you're insecure... and then you go out to a high school which makes you more insecure. And you can't speak any English and you're trying to make it there... Which was pretty crazy. And I think the biggest thing is I became much more CONFIDENT in myself and much more COMMUNICATIVE and OPEN. I also learned to ... Be helpful to myself and support people who seem like they need support. In my university if there was an exchange student, I was always trying to help them out. ... Learning the [American] culture IS IMPORTANT because of all of the stereotypes we have back in post-Soviet countries. And also trying to be more open to other people, because you learn that people are different and you have to appreciate that. And it's not that they're wrong, it's just that they're different... And it's beautiful, you know?

Nessie's experience with FLEX inspired her to pursue employment at American Councils so could support high school students from her home country to go on an exchange program to the United States.¹⁰¹

Anar participated in the FLEX program from 2010 to 2011. As part of her program, she went to a high school in Ohio. When asked about her most memorable moments, Anar stated:

First of all, I'm very so thankful to my host family. I was so blessed to have them because they're REALLY NICE people. Thanks to them, I was able to do a lot of stuff, even traveling. I traveled with my host family a lot. For example, we went to California, to Tennessee, and also Washington D.C. and L.A.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Nessie K. was conducted on December 1, 2017.

...One of the most memorable events was being a part of the volleyball team at a local church and I was part of the track team of my school. I was also part of the Key club, which is a volunteering club.
So, events... there were a lot of events.
We did a lot of volunteering, which I loved.
... I met a lot of friends.

Anar mentioned that the most rewarding aspect of the program was the experience itself, including being abroad, by herself, away from family, making new friends, and learning the culture and language. However, what surprised Anar most was the cultural differences she experienced:

Back in Kyrgyzstan, which is in Central Asia, our culture is totally different. I would even say that it is the opposite of American culture.
So, for example student-teacher relationships. In America during the first day of school, I was so... SO surprised because back in Kyrgyzstan, we are to ... be polite to the teachers a lot. And then whenever a teacher comes to the classroom, you have to stand up. This is kind of like a greeting. And then, at in the first day of school in America, I did the same thing. Everybody was sitting down and I stood up and they were looking at me. ... There were a lot of students ... like 40 students ... And then I had to explain...
My English was so bad back then, at that time. I knew I had to explain that this is kind of like part of our culture and everything.
I don't know if everybody got it.
But still, it was something different.

While reflecting on the FLEX program, Anar stated:

The [FLEX] program especially, it meant a lot.
Because right after that... coming back [from] the FLEX program... my mind was changed a little bit. I had more of a view of how everything was going on in the world.
Because Kyrgyzstan is a very small country... staying there, I would not know about the things going on around the globe.
But after [FLEX], I knew what was going on in there.
I even knew what I wanted to do next. I knew exactly what university I wanted to apply to. I knew exactly what I wanted to do.
So, before the FLEX program, I kind of was thinking of becoming a lawyer for some point but right after the FLEX program, I knew for sure that I wanted to be in business because in high school, I was in the international business class.
So, it was kind of college preparation for me ... I'm so glad that I was part of it.
...I got to know a lot of finance, about international business relations and I knew for sure that this is something that I really want to do.

So, right after coming back, I started applying for school.

In addition to being an exchange student at an American high school, Anar stated that she was referred to as an “Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan” by other American students. Since she was the only Kyrgyz student at her school, her peers would often ask her questions about Kyrgyz culture and customs. She saw it as her responsibility to represent her country well and conduct over ten presentations about her home country while she was in the United States. She also stated that this ambassador role continued once she returned to Kyrgyzstan as many of her friends, close family, and distant relatives would begin asking her about the United States. She commented, “So, in both ways, [exchanges] are really important.” When asked about what she would change about the FLEX program, Anar said, “I’ve never thought of changing anything about FLEX program because I really love this program. I think everything is really good. This program has been implemented for a long time, over 25 years. So, everything is very systematic. Everything works well.”¹⁰²

Batima is from Kazakhstan; for her FLEX program, she lived and went to high school in Alabama. Her experience with FLEX is immensely similar to Nessie’s and Anar’s experiences, in that she referenced her time with her host family as being the most memorable part of her program. As part of her reasoning, she mentioned she had a host family that was quite young and had two younger siblings, which contrasted her life back in Kazakhstan as she is the only child in her family. She also stated that she enjoyed how her family would promote trying new experiences through traveling all over the United States. “I’ve never seen the ocean before in my life. So that was my like really the most memorable experience but just traveling with family and seeing the American culture that was my favorite.”

¹⁰² Interview with Anar K. was conducted on December 19, 2017.

Regarding her adjustment to American culture, Batima stated that she felt that the FLEX program prepared her well through pre-departure orientations. However, the most challenging aspect of her program was overcoming the language barrier, “I would say in the beginning like the one month I couldn’t understand people what the people were saying because I was in Alabama state and they have the southern accent which is totally different from the average American; it’s very hard to understand ... but then I got used to it after one month. I could even speak in their accent. That was cool.” Batima mentioned that fitting in was also difficult, “The first day I couldn’t find where should I sit, which table I should belong to. And you know like in America, you’re kind of divided into subgroups (like cheerleaders, football players, and etc.) and I’m the exchange student, which is so hard to find others like me to sit with.” To help with this, Batima joined the high school robotics club, participated in competitions, and began volunteering in her community.

While looking back at her experience, Batima stated:

This exchange helped me to open my heart and my eyes to the world because before this I had never traveled to other countries or seen other cultures. I didn’t experience it. So that was my first and the most exciting [experience] and it’s changed my perception and my views on my life. And it was like this... critical year in my life, growing up. [After I came back to my home country] I turned 18, I went straight to the university. So, it actually gave me the opportunity to become an adult in the right way: to respect others, to consider other interests, not being egoistic, being more open minded, more open to people, to be more nice. So that’s just personal characteristics I developed [as a result of this program].

She also mentioned that the FLEX program is a great opportunity to see a part of the world, which most students in Kazakhstan would not get see otherwise and reflected on the impact of the FLEX program overall:

I am thankful for the U.S. Department of State still supporting this program and that we have these alumni every year.

And it is a growing alumni community.
Actually, I think the FLEX program helps with school, but what's more cool is when it ends and these alumni ... come back ... do [their] own projects back in Kazakhstan and are contributing to our community.
I think very good because we can see what's being done in the U.S., which can be implemented back in Kazakhstan because many things are not well developed yet... So this is a great thing to learn from.
...After the Soviet Union broke up, we didn't have that good relationship and we didn't know about each other.
And so, even our parents are being more enlightened by the things we've done in the U.S. and we came back with all of these stories.
So, I think it's changing the mindset of the nation in some way, and especially the FLEX alumni, they're trying to implement some things in Kazakhstan we tried in the U.S.¹⁰³

Although I had conducted semi-structured interviews, most of FLEX interviewee's reflections were not prompted. In comparison with the aforementioned FLEX online alumni story observations, the interviewees had referenced similar patterns, such as: extracurricular activities, living with a host family, and being open-minded. However, there were several other patterns that were specific to the interviewee's experiences including: having fun, having difficulty fitting in, having challenging academic experiences, implementing change, and gaining self-confidence.

4.3.3 *Interviews with SUSI Participants*

Nigora participated in the 2017 SUSI Women's Leadership program at Green River College. In regards to her experience with the program, Nigora mentioned:

It was pretty amazing. I didn't expect it would be so great. First, we had a conference in Washington D.C. through the U.S. Department of State.
And we had a very nice speaker, a woman leader.
I don't remember her name exactly but she shared her experience with us and I got really excited about the rest of the program.
... We had many events, tours, classes... we even had a public speaking class, leadership course. We learned about environmental leadership, about women leaders in the business sphere.

¹⁰³ Interview with Batima M. was conducted on December 12, 2017.

My favorite part was actually traveling a lot. The most exciting part was meeting with the mayors of Auburn and Kent city.

While discussing challenging aspects of the program, Nigora referenced the program's schedule as being extremely fast-paced, "It was really tough. Everything was scheduled and we didn't have extra free time. We had to do everything on the given time. It was pretty short. We wish it would go longer, but it was five weeks." As a result of the full schedule, Nigora mentioned that she did not have as much time with her host family. However, she did receive the opportunity to interact with four student ambassadors from the United States.

When recalling about her return to Tajikistan, Nigora stated:

First, when I left my city and I started studying in another country, I understood that it's really hard for a girl from my town to leave and study abroad. But when I went through this program, I understood that is it one of the important things that girls should do now is to gain an education. And now I am really REALLY eager to do my project as soon as possible because I am [planning to] share to all the girls from my town about the opportunity they have and they should use. It motivated me a lot to help girls to continue their education. And I really want to do that. I will tell schoolgirls about THEIR opportunities that they have for high education. Describe the issues that women are facing in our country and SHOW THEM how we can possibly solve them, what we should do for it. And we read a book during the program. It was about the leadership secrets of Hillary Clinton, and I want to work with this book as well, telling the girls ... about it and the program overall. ...[The SUSI program] is really important because you know you're really broadening your world view of everything. ... When I come back to my town ... I can talk with somebody and the particular topic is their idea of the world; I guess, within our country, they don't know anything else except our country. And when you go somewhere and you see many things and experience a lot of new things, you know what to tell others and [how to] share experiences.¹⁰⁴

Zhanna from Kazakhstan also participated in the 2017 SUSI Women's Leadership program. She described her time with SUSI as "the best month in my life." She states:

I got to know so many incredible people so many incredible women ...

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Nigora B. was conducted on December 10, 2017.

We talked to the supreme justice court, and then we talked about environmental leadership, [went] hiking, ... We have done so many things that I didn't even know I can do.

[I learned that] we can help each other, no matter what our circumstances are, no matter where we are, no matter what we have, we STILL can be leaders.

It was amazing to discover ... so many things about others and... at the same time discovering so many things about myself that I can be so much more than I am.

Zhanna reflected about the intensity of program, discussing how often they traveled, and that each day in the program was different and covered various themes related to women's leadership. She enjoyed how there were people who had provided suggestions on how to implement projects in various communities, which empowered her to promote change in her own community:

I was thinking that, "OK, it's not impossible anymore..."

And I went back to Kazakhstan and I was thinking, "I know that I'm just one person but I know what I AM capable of."

And I KNOW that I can make the change. I can be the agent of change.

I have so many people around me and one person can actually influence many other people and they can influence many many other people and it goes on and on...

And it's just a way of understanding that one like what a woman can do.

Zhanna plans to establish a conference in Kazakhstan that facilitates discussion to empower women. She intends to reach out to female students at her university and challenge their perspective of women's empowerment in Kazakhstan:

Right now, there are so many wrong images about empowerment in the internet in Kazakhstan, ... and people think that this is something bad and aggressive and I want to talk about that it's not, it's just the way we are developing ourselves... the way we are improving our position in society.

And I know that there are people that there are women... there are students... that are eager to talk about it, so want to talk about it, and to talk about SUSI program

and talk about [the book we read, called] "The Anatomy of Peace".

And then I want them to make one small change in the way they live... maybe the way they treat their siblings ...the way they talk to them or maybe their way of thinking: they might want to become a president one day or something like this.

It doesn't have to be something very big.

That's one small change.
And then I plan to gather some data and to make a questionnaire on what happened after what has changed, maybe what worked and what didn't work. ...
And then to see what can I do after that.

While summarizing her overall experience, Zhanna mentioned the following about her perspective on U.S.-Kazakhstan relations:

I got to go to the U.S. and people live there so differently.
And the way when you compare yourself and your way of living with others.
I don't know, I'm getting fascinated because this is so amazing how people can be different and that you should always stay open minded.
Because this world is not the place to be very conservative and to stay in your own box because you know globalization is going on and we're getting closer to each other no matter how far we are.
And just this way to celebrate diversity to get to know as many people as you can
To try to understand them... to understand their way of how do they feel... how do they think. ... This is what I think all the exchanges are for.
...The more we travel, for example to the U.S., [we can talk] about the U.S.-Kazakhstan relationships.
And the more U.S. citizens come to Kazakhstan... we get to know each other and we are no longer just surviving... we're living, we're communicating, we're sharing experiences.
I think it is a great way to strengthen our friendship.¹⁰⁵

Lastly, Mukaddaskhon from Uzbekistan participated in the 2015 SUSI Women's Leadership program. While discussing her highlights of the program, she mentioned that she was really excited to visit the United States and that is was her first time going abroad. As part of her experience, she shared discussions with other young leaders, had the opportunity to travel, participate in activities, take classes, plan service projects, and do community service, all of which helped her enhance her knowledge of leadership. She commented on how she was able to make friends, learn about the American lifestyle, and introduce Uzbek culture to other people. In addition to learning how to be a leader, Mukaddaskhon mentioned that she learned how to be confident presenter, good listener, cheerleader and friend, be open-minded, and how to take risks

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Zhanna L. was conducted on December 23, 2017.

and learn from her mistakes. Since returning to Uzbekistan, Mukaddaskhon has created workshops to teach leadership to women at universities and at youth organizations. She is currently planning to work with volunteers who can share and demonstrate leadership skills among youth in Uzbekistan.¹⁰⁶

Overall, the interviews from the SUSI program maintained similar patterns to that of the online SUSI stories: they demonstrated the importance of keeping an open-mind, learning about leadership, partaking in volunteer projects, and establishing their own service projects. However, the interviewees also discussed other aspects of the program in more details, such as traveling frequently, meeting new people, and inspiring change. One of the more unique aspects about SUSI that the interviewees revealed to me was that on top of learning about American culture, they were able to learn about cultures from across the world through the other participants.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Mukaddaskhon T. was conducted on December 23, 2017.

Chapter 5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter, the research in previous chapters is compiled together and discussed. I begin by interpreting and discussing my findings, then give suggestions on ways in which U.S.-Central Asian exchange programs may incorporate them. These findings, anticipated and otherwise, indicate a social and cultural trend found in Central Asian students going on U.S.-sponsored exchange programs that could be fostered to further diplomatic ties.

5.1 DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

This study explores the qualities of U.S.-sponsored exchange programs, according to participant stories, existing studies, and literature. More specifically, it examined the impacts of exchange programs as reported by various researchers and by program alumni. The research question: “What kind of impact do U.S.-sponsored academic exchanges have on the Central Asian people” relied heavily on the program analysis for answers, while the research question: “How have Central Asian academic exchange alumni made sense of their academic exchange experience to the United States?” was answered through the collection of alumni stories and in-depth interviews. During the analysis, I discovered many similarities when reviewing the results.

What surprised me most in my research findings was that the interviewees made references to their experiences abroad in a similar manner as in the alumni stories published by the Department of State and its respective exchange programs, despite the fact that only positive stories were published. This demonstrates that alumni from FLEX, Fulbright, and SUSI share several mutual experiences as they go abroad in their respective programs. However, what the interviews did shed light on, in contrast to the information presented in the online alumni stories, was that these participants also faced hardships (i.e. acclimating to an American school system

and social environment), had lack of choice in their program, and encountered time restrictions. Overall, this shared exchange experience turns into a network of alumni that frequently reach out to one another because of their connection. This conclusion was reinforced as I reflected on my own experiences working in the field of international education and witnessing a unique exchange alumni community that had formed on the basis on mutually shared exchange experiences.

I was able to identify distinct themes that related to the Central Asian alumni community. It appears that Central Asian alumni of U.S.-sponsored exchange programs acquire the mentality of maintaining an ‘open-mind.’ Participants in FLEX, SUSI, and Fulbright all mentioned this phrase as they described their experience abroad. While having an “open mind” is often viewed as a positive characteristic, it does also suggest that the participants were in situations where they were challenged, felt uncomfortable, and that their sense of values were disrupted. As such, their reference to this phrase acknowledges the difficulties of cross-cultural exchange while also claiming a positive end result from it. It is possible that these difficulties are an integral part of the exchange program as, by design, the participants are forced to leave their comfort zone to experience another perspective.

While exploring each individual program further, I discovered that FLEX, SUSI, and Fulbright each have their own program-related themes as well. For FLEX, the online alumni stories and interviews suggest that ‘volunteering,’ ‘extracurricular activities’ and ‘host family life,’ are the most common topics mentioned by program alumni. These three themes are specific to the FLEX program because of its nature: all FLEX participants must attend an American high school for one academic year, they are encouraged to participate in as many American opportunities as possible (i.e. extracurricular activities), and they live with a host family as part

of their program. This creates an extremely rounded experience for both the student and the host families. The students are able to expand their horizons by volunteering in the U.S. community that they are living in, while learning more about personal interests that they never realized they had through their extracurricular activities. They are then able to take these experiences back to their home country and use them to better their local community. Having an engaging host family provides a better opportunity for the students to fully immerse themselves in American culture, while giving the host family the opportunity to learn more about communities and cultures around the world.

Regarding the SUSI program, the data demonstrated that ‘leadership,’ ‘volunteering,’ and ‘service project’ were the most common themes. The very nature of the SUSI program is leadership focused and requires students to implement a service project in their home county at the end. It then makes sense that they would be among the most common terms used by participants. Whereas for Fulbright, the following topics were more prominent: ‘U.S. academic system,’ ‘getting empowered’ and ‘American culture’. The U.S. academic system is vastly different from the system used in their home countries, through my discussions with the students, I was not able to determine which system the majority felt was more effective. Part of what makes the Fulbright program unique is that it gives the students the agency to research the topic that they want to research, while providing them the resources to complete it. It empowers them to spend years away from home, living independently and immersing themselves in American culture.

I expected to find evidence that the impact of U.S.-sponsored academic exchanges has not been as significant in recent years as it had been when Central Asian countries began to gain independence following the Soviet era. I initially hypothesized that the newly established

governments in Central Asia, as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union and the deteriorating relationship between the U.S. and Uzbekistan, would have caused exchanges between the U.S. and Central Asia to decrease in priority and thus, provide less opportunities. To my surprise, the opposite was true. The numbers in the program analysis suggest that these U.S.-sponsored programs continue to grow despite ongoing political hardships between the two regions.

Through the examples of all nine interviewees, as well as the other examples provided through my collections of stories from the Fulbright, FLEX, Green River SUSI, and Global UGRAD programs, students from Central Asia are returning home with newly acquired skills, English language improvement, and experiences as part of their U.S.–sponsored academic exchange program. In addition to equipping Central Asian citizens with these opportunities, they are also given the tools to promote change within their home country, thus having an impact on their local community. Based on the positive impact that these exchanges have as a whole, ties between the United States and the Central Asian region are growing stronger through citizen diplomacy. This research demonstrates that the nature of U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs, including their requirements for becoming involved in local communities and their mission for fostering cultural togetherness, make academic exchanges influential in people's lives and in global political affairs.

There are many pros and cons to academic exchanges; however, these Central Asian success stories demonstrate the importance of participation in academic exchange programs. One of the main critiques of academic exchange programs is the fear of participants not wanting to return home; this does not seem to be much of an issue as many of the U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs require participants to return home and implement a service project. Academic exchange programs create cultural and educational experiences that are deeply unique

to each participant. As shown in the alumni stories, their experiences lead many to cultural understandings and calls to action. My interviews with participants revealed that each participant rationalized their own experiences within the context of their own backgrounds. This led to each participant accepting the results of their studies in slightly different manners, yet each agreed that they gained valuable and useful knowledge from their experiences. This phenomenon where participants rationalize their experiences through the lenses of their own society is one that exchange programs should anticipate and tailor their programs as a tool for promoting global understanding.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S.-CENTRAL ASIAN EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

At the national level, the United States should focus its diplomacy strategy on citizen diplomacy through exchanges, as it directly strengthens ties between the two countries and has a net positive influence on the international opinion of the United States. The existing literature demonstrates that international exchanges do have an impact in global affairs. Based on the findings from this study, these exchanges also have a positive effect on Central Asian lives and they help clear negative stereotypes of both American and Central Asian citizens, while also pointing out the cultural differences between the two. As such, more funding, priority, and support should be allocated towards the development of exchange opportunities for U.S. and Central Asian citizens.

The ECA should strive towards highlighting more alumni stories and creating opportunities for exchange participants to share their culture to larger American audiences. This additional exposure can help educate people in the United States about Central Asian culture, removing any pre-conceived stereotypes of people from the Central Asian region and vice versa. One aspect that each exchange program could take to enhance their participants experiences

would be to ask alumni what the most challenging aspects of their program was, and provide tools to new students to ease them into those challenges. As an example, some of the participants mentioned their challenges integrating with the U.S. high school social environment, an additional training relating to this challenge would help better prepare the participants for their program. Taking these steps can encourage visitors to increase their cultural competency, enhance future collaboration efforts, and establish new connections for citizens between the two regions. These recommendations are by no means exhaustive, but they are ways to help the future of U.S.-sponsored academic exchange programs.

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APPENDIX A

M.A. Research Project Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how U.S.-sponsored academic exchanges have strengthened partnerships between the United States and the Central Asian region. We are asking you to take part because you have participated in an exchange program. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn about the local and global impacts of U.S.-sponsored academic exchanges in order to understand if exchanges are capable of influencing diplomatic relations.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your experience with the exchange program, your opinion on the academic exchanges with regard to its previous structure and current structure, and your viewpoint on exchanges building relations between the United States and the Central Asian region. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the interview.

Risks and benefits: I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. There are no benefits to you.

Your answers will be not be confidential: The records of this study will be written about in a master's thesis. In any sort of report we make public, we will only include your name, gender, location of residence unless asked otherwise. Interview records will be open to the public.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Marilyn Cole. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Marilyn Cole at mcole1@uw.edu or at (503) 314-8334. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at hsdinfo@uw.edu or at (206) 543-0098.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

Printed name of person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Involvement with the US Sponsored Exchange Academic Exchange Programs:

Which program did you participate in?

When did you go on your exchange program? How long were you abroad?

How did you first find out about the exchange program?

What was the application process like for you?

Where did you travel to? Where did you stay?

Describe your experience thus far with your program. Could you tell me what activities were most?

- Enjoyable
- Interesting
- Rewarding
- Challenging
- Difficult

Could you describe a typical day? How did that compare to your day-to-day in your home country?

How much interaction did you have with the local culture?

Post-Program Experience:

Have you participated in any other exchanges?

What type of impact has the exchange program had on you? What did you learn from these exchanges?

Have you maintained any connection with the program after you've finished it?

How important are exchanges in for people in Central Asia?

What type of values do academic exchanges promote?

How accessible are these programs for Central Asian citizens?

Which aspects of academic exchanges would you change and why?

Do these exchanges have an impact in bridging these two regions together?

APPENDIX C



DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

December 1, 2017

Dear Marilyn Cole:

On 12/1/2017, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (HSD) reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Reshaping Diplomacy in Central Asia and the United States: A Case Study on Academic Exchange Programs
Investigator:	Marilyn Cole
IRB ID:	STUDY00003714
Funding:	None

Exempt Status

HSD determined that your proposed activity is human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status (Category 2).

- This determination is valid for the duration of your research.
- This means that your research is exempt from the federal human subjects regulations, including the requirement for IRB approval and continuing review.

If you consider changes to the activities in the future and know that the changes will require IRB review (or you are not certain), you may request a review or new determination by submitting a Modification to this application.

Thank you for your help with this review and I wish you all the best with your project.

Sincerely,

Amanda Guyton
Team Operations Lead, IRB J
aguyton7@uw.edu
206-616-5576