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Karen Evans-Romaine

Dianna Murphy

Anna Tumarkin

Laura Marshall

Assel Almuratova

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Connecting through Language and Culture Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The University of Wisconsin–Madison Russian Flagship Program

**KAREN EVANS-ROMAINE, DIANNA MURPHY, ANNA TUMARKIN
LAURA MARSHALL, ASSEL ALMURATOVA**

1. Introduction

Research on the mental health and overall well-being of U.S. college students during the COVID-19 pandemic confirms how profoundly the pandemic has affected their lives: students are experiencing increased levels of anxiety and an overall decrease in the quality of life (Firkey, Sheinfil, and Woolf-King 2021), increased symptoms of mood disorders and stress (Charles et al. 2021), and increased levels of depression (Wang et al. 2020). For many students, the need for physical distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 has resulted in acute feelings of isolation and disconnection. Wang et al., for example, found that the top lifestyle concern reported by U.S. college students during the pandemic was related to changes in social relations and to social isolation (7). The difficulties experienced by students during the global pandemic highlight the critical importance of human interactions, human relationships, and community – not only for students’ learning and their satisfaction with their academic coursework, but for their overall mental health and well-being.

Among all academic disciplines, instructional programs in languages are uniquely positioned to serve as vital sites for human connection and community for students in emergency and non-emergency contexts alike. Given the centrality of interaction in second language acquisition (SLA) and teaching, students in language courses are not just interacting with course content: they are also interacting with peers, instructors, and often other speakers of the language in the wider community. This positioning of language programs as sites for human connection aligns with sociocultural and sociocognitive approaches to SLA (see, for example, the chapters in Atkinson 2011) as well as with ecological approaches such as the “transdisciplinary framework” put forward by the Douglas Fir Group (2016) that places “individuals engaging with others” at the center of the micro level of social activity in a multiscale model, embedded within

the meso level of sociocultural institutions and communities (Douglas Fir Group 2016, 25).¹ Through the many varied interactions in which students in language programs are active participants, and as students move through sequences of language courses in cohorts, students can form meaningful relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of the academic program. Outside of formal courses, many language programs offer opportunities for students to practice the language of study in informal contexts and to participate in cultural activities that also provide opportunities for social interaction. Instructional programs in languages can thus be understood not only in terms of their academic mission, but also as sites within the university for meeting students' need for social connection.

Students of languages value this aspect of language learning. Research by Magnan et al. (2012; 2014), for example, found that among the five "5 Cs" goal areas of the World-Readiness Standards (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, Communities), the Communities goal area was the one most highly prioritized by U.S. postsecondary language students, followed closely by Communication. Magnan et al.'s findings are supported by a survey of all undergraduate students conducted at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in Fall 2020 (University of Wisconsin–Madison n.d.) that showed that students long for a sense of connection and community in their academic courses. Looking at students' satisfaction with their courses during the pandemic, the survey found, according to Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning John Zumbrunnen in summarizing survey findings, that "forming meaningful relationships with instructors and peers is crucial for student learning – and everything we're hearing from students reinforces that" (Erickson 2020). Sadly, according to that survey, 65% of student respondents felt "'a little or not at all' connected to their peers or members of their community on campus" (University of Wisconsin–Madison n.d., 4, 29).

This article offers a case study of how one postsecondary Russian program, the Russian Flagship at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, has leveraged existing affordances in the program's design (Evans-Romaine and Murphy 2021) to support new forms of interaction and social connection through language learning in the context of emergency remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.² Despite the many challenges

¹ See also the 2019 special issue of *The Modern Language Journal on SLA Across Disciplinary Borders* (Byrnes and Duff, eds.).

² See Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova (2020) for a discussion of the difference between emergency remote and planned online language education.

in abruptly transitioning to emergency remote instruction in March 2020, the Russian Flagship program was well-positioned to adapt to an online environment that fosters community-building, given its structure as a wraparound program that places student academic, linguistic, and cultural development, and student agency at the forefront. The Russian Flagship program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, one of eight Russian Flagships and 31 Language Flagship programs in critical languages at 23 colleges and universities in the United States, is a federally-funded program supported by the National Security Education Program in the U.S. Department of Defense to enable undergraduates of all majors to attain ACTFL Superior-level (ILR 3) language proficiency through a combination of intensive coursework, tutoring, co-curricular programming, and study abroad. The capstone study abroad program, administered by American Councils for International Education, is at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, Kazakhstan and includes coursework, tutoring, co-curricular programming, a homestay, and a professional internship. As described in Evans-Romaine and Murphy (2021), the Russian Flagship program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison combines classroom instruction in both academic-year and summer-intensive environments, individual and small-group tutoring, a variety of co-curricular activities meant to appeal to students’ diverse interests and preferred forms of interaction, and a combination of regular advising by Flagship staff and peer mentoring. In addition, any University of Wisconsin–Madison student may choose to apply and live in *Russkii dom*, the Russian-language floor of the International Learning Community (ILC). Components of the program’s design that are included in this descriptive case study are Russian language instruction at all levels, including summer intensive instruction at lower levels; Russian language tutoring; advising and peer mentoring; co-curricular programming; and the residential *Russkii dom* in the ILC.

The article seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How do aspects of the Russian Flagship program encourage and facilitate social interaction and open channels of communication and community-building?
2. How does the structure of the Russian Flagship program balance students’ sometimes contradictory needs during a time of social and physical isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How does the Russian Flagship program work to counteract students’ sense of isolation during a period of pandemic when isolation cannot be avoided?

In addressing these questions, the article describes aspects of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Russian Flagship program that support student learning in an online environment and, at the same time, support social connection through interactions between students and their instructors, peer-to-peer interactions, and community-building throughout.

2. Classroom instruction: A balancing act

A noteworthy aspect of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Fall 2020 survey of undergraduates is the roughly even divide among student preferences for synchronous and asynchronous instruction: in selecting among modality preferences for online instruction, 47% of students reported that they prefer synchronous instruction, while 50% prefer asynchronous instruction (University of Wisconsin–Madison n.d., 4, 14). One student respondent noted that “meeting synchronously or at least checking in individually to see how their students are actually doing [...] shows that they actually care if you are doing well or not” (University of Wisconsin–Madison n.d., 14). On the other hand, the slightly higher percentage of student support for asynchronous teaching is explained in survey findings by its flexibility: asynchronous classes allow for students in various time zones or with complicated schedules to engage with the course content at a time convenient for them. Another important factor is screen fatigue: students surveyed reported that “synchronous lectures are often very mentally draining and are often done poorly because of technical difficulties” (University of Wisconsin–Madison n.d., 14).

For the reasons cited in this survey, and to offset the cumulative effect of screen fatigue expressed by students in the latter half of the Spring 2020 semester, the summer intensive first- and second-year Russian courses were redesigned for online delivery to balance synchronous and asynchronous learning. In the face-to-face intensive summer program, students meet daily for four hours. Instead of replicating this schedule in the online environment, the class was designed for two hours daily of synchronous instruction supplemented by two hours daily of independent work with instructional support. During the two synchronous class hours, instructors focused on activities that ensured that students were engaged and speaking as much as possible: students completed pair and small group speaking tasks, as well as group activities emphasizing teamwork. The synchronous instructional hours resembled a typical face-to-face classroom, with an emphasis on interpersonal speaking and active student engagement.

The remaining two hours, designed to increase student agency, were focused primarily on learning activities in modalities other than speaking and for more independent work, but with instructional support. The format of these hours resembled a combination of a study hall and office hours, carefully coordinated with synchronous class meetings. Students were not required to be on camera during these two hours, nor were they required to be engaged in working together. Instead, students completed graded assignments, asked their instructor for help as needed, and took quizzes and tests. Apart from quiz or test days, the general expectation was that students be engaged in the course material, although attendance was not taken. The course instructors, on the other hand, were on camera and available for consultation: if a student was having trouble with a writing assignment or had a question on grammar, the instructor was there. Since the summer intensive courses typically require at least four hours a day of homework, in addition to assignments that students completed during the “study hall,” they also used this time to complete homework while the instructor was present to answer questions. The flexibility of this format allowed students greater freedom and increased agency: if they wished, they could complete coursework and homework later in the day. This balance between synchronous instruction, during which students were on camera and required to be engaged and speaking, and the more flexible independent work hours during which students could complete assignments with support from instructors, was intended to ameliorate screen fatigue and to give students both options and access to guidance as needed. The success of this approach was shown both in student preparedness for synchronous hours and in unofficial (internal) exit OPIs, which indicated that all had attained ACTFL Intermediate Low to Mid-level proficiency.

To promote student engagement and sustain motivation, instructors emphasized creativity and flexibility in assignments. For example, students drew apartment advertisements on the whiteboard in their breakout rooms and visited each other’s virtual apartments. Students in intensive second-year Russian wrote and performed plays, wrote a story about an imaginary creature of their own design, and solved a murder mystery together while the instructor played film noir music in the background. Creative classroom activities emphasized teamwork and community-building, and instructors tapped into student interests and talents in planning activities.

3. Integrating co-curricular programming into a summer intensive environment

Normally the summer intensive Russian language program is full of co-curricular activities: a weekly film showing, a weekly Russian conversation table during the lunch hour, an outing to a local pelmeni restaurant, and various other activities, the last of which is traditionally a talent show and awards ceremony, followed by a Russian food potluck. In the entirely online instructional environment, co-curricular activities were modified to emphasize opportunities for students to socialize and make connections online, while also minimizing screen time. Activities were reduced to six over the eight-week period, but each was given special attention and was designed to meet student wishes and interests. Weekly film screenings were reduced to only two for the summer: *Stiliagi (Hipsters)* and cartoons. Students' lives were put front and center: there was a show-and-tell in which students could introduce their pet(s) to each other or share anything else they wished. Students were invited (but not required) to give virtual tours of their hometowns using their phones.

The most popular co-curricular events were two cooking classes, one on *bliny* and the other on *samsa* (Kazakh savory pastries); the first was so popular that students requested the second. These cooking classes were staged as they might be on a cooking show, in which one instructor taught the other how to cook. As two of the instructors were roommates, they decided to stage the cooking classes in their shared apartment. Using two cameras, from a laptop and a smartphone, the instructors were able to play the roles of teacher and student. The two cameras focused on their interactions and on the hands of the cooking teacher at work. Students were sent lists of ingredients in advance so that they could participate at home, if they wished, and the instructors remained engaged with students throughout the class. If one student's *bliny* did not work at first, that provided an opportunity for students to learn the expression «Первый блин комом». The lesson on *samsa* gave instructors, both from Kazakhstan, the opportunity to introduce aspects of Kazakh culture as well: one instructor played the *dombra* and another talked to students about ways in which the history of Kazakhstan in the Soviet era affected the daily lives of those in Kazakhstan then and now, from its ethnic diversity derived in part from Soviet-era repressions and mass migrations, to the reverence for food harkening back to the mass famine in Kazakhstan in 1930–33.

3.1. Community-building at a distance

The cooking classes, and students' "show and tell" and hometown tours,

provide glimpses into the affordances of an online environment that would be difficult if not impossible to replicate in a university campus classroom: through these cooking classes, and through demonstrations at an instructor's home of apartment vocabulary, students entered their instructors' homes and lives in ways that are rare in college settings today and virtually unheard of at a large university. In turn, students could share aspects of their lives if they wished: their homes, their pets, their hometowns, and in the talent show, their talents and interests. Students' request for a second cooking class showed their desire for a glimpse into home lives in the Russian-speaking world as well as for immersive and "hands-on" learning experiences. At the beginning of the course, instructors made introductory videos and invited students to do the same: these virtual introductions helped to establish a close-knit virtual class community and made it easier for students to take both the normal risks associated with language learning and the emotionally higher risks of introducing their hometowns and even their homes or pets to students whom they may never have met in person. Students engaged in social activities at a distance when socializing in person was impossible. Moreover, students enhanced opportunities for creating community by connecting with each other through WhatsApp – something instructors could not have required students to do, in order to protect their privacy.

At the same time, it is impossible to hide the losses for community-building in a face-to-face summer intensive environment, primarily in the form of spontaneous connections: the conversations that can take place before and after class, the possibility to make friends and create community over a cup of coffee in a local café or lunch outside, and through collective participation in activities such as preparing for a final talent show.

4. Lessons for the academic year: Russian courses

The University of Wisconsin–Madison Fall 2020 Undergraduate Student Survey presented a disturbing finding: almost 59% of student respondents reported that their Fall 2020 course workload was less manageable than in Spring 2020, while only 9% reported that their coursework load was more manageable in the Fall than in the previous Spring. (Almost one third of the students, 32%, reported that the Spring 2020 and Fall 2020 coursework loads were about the same.) Even before the publication of this data, it was clear by the fall that students were already tired of onscreen learning, onscreen interactions generally, and continued physical and social isolation. The program therefore made strategic decisions that emphasized intentional communication between students and Flagship staff and among students.

In making decisions about tutoring and co-curricular programming, we solicited student input in as many ways as possible, in order to make sure we would build a program that addressed changing student needs and interests. Key to the program design were student agency and flexibility in all aspects of the program's delivery.

The lessons learned from the intensive summer session were used in planning for the fall, when most courses remained online: multiple low-stakes assignments (which had already been part of the Russian program's instructional practice), open-book and open-note tests, and surveys of students regarding their needs and concerns related to online learning. Language instruction remained daily and synchronous, in order to align with face-to-face practices as closely as possible. Classroom instruction emphasized student engagement and interpersonal speaking, with non-speaking activities moved outside class time. Teaching assistants exchanged ideas for creative activities that kept students engaged.

5. Tutoring

A key component of all Language Flagship programs is tutoring, which, in annual University of Wisconsin–Madison Russian Flagship student surveys, is regularly rated as one of the most impactful aspects of the program. Russian Flagship students are required to participate in one to three hours of non-credit tutoring per week; at lower levels, this takes the form of paired or small-group tutoring, and beginning with third-year Russian, students are required to participate in one hour of individual and one hour of small-group tutoring per week. Students in the program are expected to bring their own requests and questions to tutoring, so the sessions are highly personalized and tailored to students' interests. Group tutoring has been less popular than individual tutoring: although it provides students with opportunities to engage in discussion, it also involves scheduling difficulties and interpersonal challenges, including compromises regarding speaking time, topics for discussion, and questions that can be addressed in the time allotted.

In Spring 2020, the program began mid-semester to offer only virtual tutoring; this practice continues throughout Spring 2021. During Summer 2020 and academic year 2020-21 the program changed its tutoring structure to accommodate students' desire for one-on-one tutoring. During the summer, the program moved to an opt-in model, providing students with optional 30-minute tutoring sessions, limited to two per week. During the academic year, tutoring was once again required but was one-on-one for students at all levels, except for small-group second-year tutoring in

the fall. The Flagship leadership continues to discuss the optimal length of tutoring sessions in the virtual context and will once again survey students in Spring 2021 regarding their tutoring preferences: one-on-one or small-group, and 30- or 50-minute sessions. While individual tutoring allows only for student-tutor interaction, students value that opportunity to speak one-on-one with tutors, just as they had before the pandemic. Tutoring also provides students with opportunities to converse with Russian speakers other than their course instructors. For all these reasons, tutoring plays an important role in relationship- and community-building.

6. Co-curricular programming

Lessons learned both from the summer intensive program and from successful co-curricular activities of previous years include the following. First, more is not better. As the research on student well-being during the pandemic has shown, and as most of us interacting with students regularly have observed, students are under enormous stress: balancing coursework presented in a variety of forms and modalities; scheduling and time management challenges in a mixed in-person/synchronous/asynchronous environment; screen fatigue; family and work responsibilities; financial and health concerns; and isolation. Given the many sources of stress that students are facing, the Russian Flagship regularly surveys students about what kinds of co-curricular activities they would like to participate in, engages students as participants in co-organizing activities if they wish, and limits the number of co-curricular activities, their length, and the means and frequency with which these activities are announced. Information about co-curricular activities and all other pertinent announcements are conveyed to students in a weekly e-bulletin, the *Ezhenedel'nik*, and co-curricular activities are limited to one or occasionally two per week. Students are welcome to turn on their cameras or leave them off during co-curricular events, and to drop in and leave when they wish, thus reducing the stress of committing to a long evening activity when homework assignments and other obligations may still await them.

Second is the recognition of the affordances and limitations of the online environment in designing different types of co-curricular programming. Popular online activities have included informal conversations with alumni about their current jobs in a series called *Career Connect*; a series called *Telemost*, with guest speakers who talk informally with students about their personal histories, work, home cities in the Russian-speaking world, or current events; and social activities designed to reduce stress. Social activities have ranged from holiday celebrations

to creating playlists of Russian music, to crafting activities arranged in a format similar to the cooking classes described above. For the crafting activities, students are sent supplies or supply lists in advance, with supplies provided either by University Housing from the budget for International Learning Community activities, or by the Flagship. Students and a staff facilitator gather online to paint, sew, make holiday cards, or engage in similar hands-on activities, all while chatting informally. Students have also enjoyed storytelling activities and games, such as a *Mad Libs*-style ghost story created for Halloween, and a conversation game, *Express-Beseda*, in which students and tutors rotate among breakout rooms and conversation topics.

A strong source of support in developing online co-curricular activities in recent years has been the Flagship Technology Innovation Center at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, which has assisted in the development of blended-learning programs such as joint undergraduate research conferences hosted by all Russian Flagship programs.³ This year, to provide a forum for building community across Russian Flagship programs with a less stressful event, the shared program is a series of blended learning activities culminating in an online trivia game based loosely on the Russian game show *Чмо? Где? Когда?* (What? Where? When?). The thematic focus of the project is the underground Russian rock scene in 1980s Leningrad. Elements include local online screenings of Kirill Serebrennikov's film *Leto*; an online lecture by music journalist and author Artemy Troitsky on the rock group Kino; blended learning activities for students to complete individually or in teams; and an online trivia game in which teams of students compete to answer questions about the film, the group Kino and its members, the setting, the period, and Russian realia. Although the activity is designed to introduce students from all levels of Russian to important aspects of perestroika-era Russian culture, its main goal is community-building across Russian Flagship programs. Since these students have been unable to meet each other during intensive summer study domestically or abroad, the hope is that participation in this series will encourage students to develop friendships and will foster a sense of connection and community across programs that will help motivate students to continue their intensive study of Russian until they can meet in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or Almaty.

³ Russian Flagship programs are at Bryn Mawr College; Indiana University; Portland State University; the University of California, Los Angeles; University of Georgia; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; University of Wisconsin-Madison; and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

7. Advising

Advising has always been a key component of all Language Flagship programs, but in this time of pandemic-induced isolation, advising has also provided an emotional lifeline to students. Students are reaching out more often than before the onset of COVID-19 for individual advising to help them create and navigate new paths when carefully laid plans have to be changed because of the pandemic: not only academic paths and course choices, but also study abroad, career plans, and other opportunities. Advising appointments that begin with academic and career questions sometimes turn to student concerns that extend beyond their studies – about life in isolation, health concerns affecting their studies, and general worries about their futures. One of the points of pride of Language Flagship programs is our engagement in “high-impact” practices, including advising; through advising, we had established relationships of trust and respect with our students prior to the pandemic. Existing relationships with students have deepened during this period of isolation, when access to campus counselors is limited because of the sheer volume of requests; students sometimes simply need to talk to someone they trust regarding the stresses of academic life and the uncertainty of future plans. Our previously existing flexible advising structure has allowed us to build on these relationships and to better support our students, while, as always, referring them further for issues beyond our professional capacity to resolve. Flagship and other staff, in turn, have also experienced much higher levels of stress in balancing competing professional and personal demands, and here too community has been vital: workshops on online teaching hosted by the Language Institute, by peer institutions, and by national organizations such as the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East-European Languages (AATSEEL) and the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) have provided invaluable sources of support – from innovations in online teaching to advice on handling new challenges in the online instructional environment, to forums for discussion.

8. Student-to-student mentoring: Flagship student ambassadors

Another strong aspect of community-building in the Russian Flagship is peer mentoring. This program affordance has become even more important during the pandemic, when students feel particularly isolated and in need of the support not only of academic advisors, but of their peers. For students who are new to University of Wisconsin–Madison, this gateway into student life at the university and within the Russian Flagship has been critical. Peer mentoring in the Russian Flagship is formalized through

a program of student ambassadors, who are hired for hourly positions. Student ambassadors participate in the planning and implementation of co-curricular activities; serve as spokespeople to convey student wishes and concerns to the program's leadership; and serve as representatives of the program. They assist with program recruitment by making informational classroom visits, participating in various campus resource fairs, and meeting with prospective students. Most of all, they enjoy serving as peer mentors to newly admitted students. At the beginning of each semester, ambassadors are assigned to small groups of two to four new students and are asked to meet with them monthly, equipped with a list of discussion questions provided by the program on their goals, the Russian Flagship, and strategies for attaining Superior-level proficiency. They are program ambassadors in every sense of the word.

In this year of isolation, the mentoring program has changed its rhythm, from spontaneous encounters in Russian Flagship-designated spaces on campus to more intentional, scheduled meetings online. In prior years, students would see their peer mentors and meet other students in dedicated program spaces or in the hallways of classroom buildings. These chance meetings would lead to new introductions and new relationship- and community-building. In addition, mentors would introduce their mentees to fellow Flagship students at co-curricular events. With the opportunity for spontaneous meetings missing, students have stronger incentives to arrange for meetings with their mentors, and mentors in turn help their charges become better integrated into the program.

The peer mentoring program has proven beneficial to the emotional well-being of all participants. Mentors feel that they have an important role to play in shepherding new students through this difficult time. The result of this mutually beneficial relationship is that students are communicating with each other more frequently than was originally expected of mentors, and on an increasing number of platforms. Because mentoring activities can take place in English if mentors are working with lower-level students, students can be paired based on academic majors, areas of interest, or personalities, not on language level. Finally, mentors are asked to write brief summaries of their meetings with their mentees, so that when questions or suggestions about the program arise, Flagship leadership can intervene or make policy or programmatic adjustments.

9. Residential learning: *Russkii dom* in the International Learning Community

Perhaps even more than the other affordances described above, residential

life has had to adjust radically to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in the ILC live in single rooms, but dormitory capacity has been reduced in order to ensure student safety. Students are unable to engage in the kinds of activities that are normally a part of life in the International Learning Community: ILC dinners for all residents, with students from each language house sitting at one table; tea-drinking evenings, games, or film showings in dormitory lounges; outings on or off campus or further from campus, such as group trips to the Russian grocery store. The Graduate Language Program Coordinator (GLPC) of *Russkii dom*, a graduate student in Slavic, has worked closely with the Russian Flagship program to coordinate social activities that complement Flagship activities, but which also provide *Russkii dom* residents a sense that they have a community of their own. Biweekly ILC dinners are replaced with biweekly online conversations with faculty members who talk with students informally about their career and life paths, followed by an online conversation in Russian with the GLPC and the faculty director of *Russkii dom*, also a co-director of the Russian Flagship. Following the same principles that guide the structure of co-curricular activities this year for the Flagship, these conversations are limited to 30 minutes. This allows for small-group conversation with a graduate student and a faculty member in Russian without requiring students to stay for a long time.

10. Lessons for the future

This article provided a descriptive case study of how a postsecondary language program, the Russian Flagship at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, provided various ways for students to virtually interact and connect with each other and with program faculty and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic in academic year and intensive summer courses, and through tutoring, co-curricular programming, advising, and peer mentoring. We are under no illusion that the program's efforts to build community through the activities and affordances described above are always successful. Students still feel stressed and isolated, deprived of the spontaneous encounters and social activities that form a vital part of campus life. Students still report a preference for in-person language courses. Yet as colleagues have noted in the forums mentioned above, there is a good deal to be learned from the experience of living in isolation and studying and working online during the year of COVID-19. What lessons can we bring to our instruction and tutoring, co-curricular activities, advising, and mentoring once we can return to face-to-face interactions? And more importantly, what can be applied beyond Flagship programs?

Student-centered planning. We will continue to check in with students through a variety of channels, from surveys to individual meetings to feedback through student ambassadors, to make sure that we continue to offer a program that is not only focused on student learning, but on their overall well-being. Informal student surveys are an easy, informative, low-cost approach to obtain student feedback beyond course evaluations: on student goals, wishes for co-curricular planning, and overall program suggestions.

Student mentorship. Peer mentorship, peer tutoring, peer conversation exchange programs, and peer input into the design and organization of co-curricular activities can be implemented in any language program through exchanges with other programs, student Russian Clubs, and Russian community organizations. Credit-bearing service-learning programs are one way to organize some of these activities that would formally acknowledge student initiatives with other programs and in the community.

Balance and flexibility. Throughout the country, in all programs, instructors have learned a great deal from teaching and working in a remote emergency context. We can bring to face-to-face instruction those aspects of online learning that have worked well, from blended course design to activities that meet a variety of student needs, to cognizance of the many demands facing students as they reenter “normal” life in the post-pandemic period and readjust their plans for the future.

Creating new spaces for interaction. Teaching and learning online from our homes has shown us that we can blend classroom instruction with activities outside the walls of the classroom. In these more porous classrooms (Godwin-Jones 2020), we can consider new ways to bring guest speakers from around the world into our academic and co-curricular programs, take students on tours of Russian-speaking places and invite students to give us guided tours of their own hometowns, teach cooking online from our homes. We can continue to build community by taking into account our own and our students’ lives beyond the classroom.

Advocates for language education often focus on the cognitive, academic, or career-related benefits of additional language learning. In this article, we have tried to make the case of the importance of language learning in meeting students’ needs for human connection and community. The experience of teaching and supporting students during the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened our awareness of this aspect of our work. As we prepare for our return to face-to-face instruction post-pandemic, we will continue to foreground the well-being of our students, our colleagues, and

ourselves in our teaching practices and in our broader program planning, design, and implementation.

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