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A Longitudinal Survey of the Language Learning Careers of ACTR Advanced Students of Russian: 1976-2000

*Dan E. Davidson
Susan Goodrich Lehmann*

Introduction

In 1976, the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR) began sending American college students to Russia for advanced training in Russian language and literature. The original ACTR program was open to qualified students from any U. S. institution and represented one of the very few opportunities available to American students, graduate students, or faculty to pursue advanced language training in Russia, in this case, the newly established A. S. Pushkin Institute of the Russian Language in Moscow. Admission to the program was competitive, and, in practice, the ACTR program accepted for the most part graduate students and immediate-post BA students into the program. Within five years, the ACTR programs were expanded to include limited opportunities for year-long study, as well as summer study at the Pushkin Institute academic and residential complex in southwest Moscow. During the following decade, the number of host institutions in Russia gradually expanded to include the Herzen Pedagogical Institute (now the Russian State Pedagogical University) in St. Petersburg, Moscow International University, Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University, and the Vladimir State Pedagogical University (CORA) program, as well as others.

As of 2005, more than 4,500 students and scholars from 315 colleges and universities have taken part in summer, semester or academic year advanced-level language and regional studies training programs in Russia or other NIS countries under the auspices of the ACTR /American Councils, now the largest American academic exchange organization with the Russophone world. American Councils manages bilateral exchanges of high school, college, and graduate students as well as exchanges of teachers, researchers, and other professionals. In fiscal year 2005, American Councils administered exchange programs for 4,200 citizens of Russia and Eurasia and 625 U. S. participants, many of them supported on long-term degree-related study or research supported by U. S. or foreign governments or private funders.

From its inception, ACTR has placed a premium on the collection and analysis of performance-based data related to all American Councils/ACTR training programs. Language training data maintained for a typical program participant include basic demographic data, educational background (major field, degrees held, schools attended), fellowship support, qualifying examination scores, recommendations, pre and post program proficiency test scores in reading, listening, and oral communication, Russian host institution, and course work completed.

Table 1: American Councils' Exchange Program Database 1976 to Present		
Section	Topic	# of Questions
A.	Biographical Data	13
B.	Russian Proficiency Pre-Program Scores	10
C.	Leadership and Adaptability Pre-Program Scores	7
D.	Russian Proficiency Post-Program Scores	3

(See Appendices 1 and 2 for more detailed information on each section.)
 Some of these data have been analyzed and the results published in Davidson et al. 1993 and 1995.

In 1997, American Councils received a research grant from the U.S. Department of Education (International Research and Studies, Title VI) to carry out a survey of U. S. alumni of the ACTR overseas Russian language programs. The primary purpose of this survey was to gain a perspective on the long-term impact of the exchange experience on both personal and career development. The Outbound Alumni Survey Project was a multi-stage process, detailed in the methodology section below, and American Councils is pleased to report that the final dataset contained 701 completed surveys.

The 172 question Outbound Alumni Survey covers nine major topic areas. They are:

Table 2: Outbound Alumni Survey Spring to Fall 2000		
Section	Topic	# of Questions
A.	Biographical, Educational and Employment History	26
B.	Pre-College Russian Language Training	14
C.	College Russian Language Training	11
D.	U.S. Summer Language Training in Russian	21
E.	Graduate School Training in Russian	6
F.	Russian Language Study Abroad	42
G.	Current Russian Language Proficiency	14
H.	Current Use of Russian	18
I.	General Employment Preferences & Attitude Towards Language Study	20

In combination with the Exchange Program Database, the Outbound Alumni Survey was designed to allow analysis of five broad areas of interest: 1) language study, 2) language learning and ability, 3) exchange experience, 4) language maintenance, and 5) career impact of language study. Each section concentrated on a core set of research questions. Table 3 below highlights our main research foci, but does not exhaust all of the possible topics of study.

**Table 3: Outbound Alumni Survey
Primary Research Questions**

1) Language Study

What factors prompt people to take up the study of Russian in college?
Do heritage learners have different reasons for studying Russian?
Are people who take up Russian more likely to have previously studied a foreign language than people who take up other languages?
Do graduate students in the Russian Department enhance undergraduate training in Russian, and if so, how?

2. Language Learning and Ability

What is the relationship between pre-exchange training and/or proficiency in Russian and language gain during the exchange?
What are the factors that predict language gain in study abroad environments?

3. Exchange Experience

What factors prompted people to go on exchange?
At what stage do students get the most out of the exchange in terms of language skill development?
At what stage do students get the most out of the exchange in terms of non-language development (e.g. increased confidence, increased adaptability, etc.)?
Are the effects of the first and subsequent exchanges different?
How do different in-country living arrangements influence skill development? (Dorm versus home stay, for example.)
Is language development greater among students who make Russian friends? If so, is development greater across all modalities?
How do people evaluate the role of study abroad in their overall educational experience?
Can we anticipate that Russian language majors will value the exchange for different reasons than students with other majors – sociology, political science, international studies, comparative history, etc.?
Did the exchange experience shape the person's attitude toward the United States? Toward the former Soviet Union/Russia? How?

4. Language Maintenance

What factors effect Russian proficiency for people at different distances from the exchange experience?
Are certain groups of people more likely to actively work to *maintain* language skills?
What life-long learning strategies do people use to maintain their Russian?
Are certain activities more effective in maintaining language skills?

5. Career Choice

To what extent do alumni use Russian in their careers?

Is there a relationship between post-exchange language proficiency and career choice?

Is there a relationship between highest degree attained, major, or degree institution and career use of Russian?

Which groups within the exchange population seek out jobs involving Russian, knowledge of Russian history, society and politics, or frequent travel to the former Soviet Union?

The Outbound Alumni Survey Project is a first both in terms of scope and size. This article is the first in a series of articles that will explore the findings of the combined Exchange Program and Outbound Alumni Survey Databases. We anticipate that these research findings will contribute to informed policy-formation regarding the funding of academic exchanges and overseas study.

Outbound Alumni Survey Methodology

Survey Design

The survey was developed in four design phases. Dan Davidson, William Rivers, and Kim Fedchak, the latter two then Ph.D. candidates in Russian and Second Language Acquisition at Bryn Mawr College, designed a pilot survey containing 145 open-ended questions. The pilot survey was mailed to 90 selected alumni in 1998. Thirty-four alumni participated in the initial pilot survey. Their answers were analyzed by Kim Fedchak in a report entitled "The Long-Term Patterns of Language Use after Graduation: The Case of ACTR Study Abroad Alumni," presented at the 1998 AATSEEL meeting in San Francisco.

In the spring of 1999, a closed version of the alumni survey was drafted by Dan Davidson and Susan Lehmann, author of **Research Methods in Cyberspace: Internet Exercises for Social Science Research Courses**. The survey was pre-tested in the American Councils' Washington, D.C. office. Fifteen Washington D.C.-based American Councils' employees took the survey and gave written and oral suggestions for modifications. This group was chosen as a test population because it mirrored in many respects the alumni population in terms of age, language study, exchange abroad participation, and career patterns. The employees also had experience with exchange program management, and thus were able to suggest some less common student profiles that the first draft of the survey did not adequately accommodate.

In the summer of 1999, Davidson and Lehmann further revised the survey following consultations with Richard Brecht and Michael Long, both of whom were investigating professional language utilization and needs analysis in separate projects of the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland at that time. This set of revisions focused on the ability of the

survey to test current theories concerning language use over the life course and the factors predicting success in language gain during study abroad programs.¹

Alumni Search

Simultaneous with the survey design, American Councils took on the separate logistical challenge of locating ACTR program alumni, many of whom had not been in touch with the organization for upwards of two decades. Because one of the main concerns of this study was to develop a comprehensive picture of the scope of career patterns for alumni, we discarded the suggestion that we simply contact those alumni that currently belong to Russian or language-related organizations. We were concerned that by only referencing membership guides for the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies or the American Association of Slavic and East European Languages we would disproportionately skew the sample in favor of career academics. We similarly discarded the suggestion that we simply search the Washington, D.C. metro area for alumni, fearing that that approach would over-sample those alumni engaged in non-profit, foundation and government work.

Instead, using the Exchange Program Database we grouped alumni according to the U.S. educational institution that they were attending at the time of their outbound exchange. This yielded alumni lists for more than 274 colleges and universities. They broke down as follows:

Table 4: Outbound Alumni Dispersion Across Educational Institutions	
Alumni per Educational Institution	Concentration of Educational Institutions
1 alumna/us	82 colleges or universities
2 to 25 alumni	148 colleges or universities
26 to 100 alumni	34 colleges or universities
More than 100 alumni	10 colleges or universities

We prepared an alumni list for each college containing the student names at the time of the exchange, the degree program, and the year of the exchange.

We then divided the colleges and universities into two groups, A) those with 1 to 25 alumni, and B) those with more than 25 alumni. We wrote to each alumni association that fell in Group A, enclosing a list of alumni and explaining our research objectives, and asked for current addresses for their graduates. Though many predicted that educational institutions would not

¹ The authors are grateful for the suggestions of a number of professionals in the Russian field who generously reviewed versions of the final survey instrument for completeness and appropriateness including Richard Brecht (Maryland), Patricia Chaput (Harvard University), Lisa Choate (ACTR), and Maria Lekic (Maryland and ACTR).

release this information, more than 90 % of institutions in Group A provided us with whatever alumni addresses they had on file.² Schools varied a great deal in the completeness and accuracy of their records. We found that large, state universities had the least complete files, although there were a few notable exceptions. Approximately 20 colleges and universities declined to provide addresses to us directly, but offered to forward survey material to alumni. Many of the schools in this group were small liberal arts colleges and most of the women's colleges. A few schools were so enthusiastic that they printed up mailing labels for all relevant alumni.

Schools in Group B posed more of a challenge since they had a lot more alumni. This meant both more work for the alumni offices and more of a problem for our sample if they refused to assist us. To increase our yield, we decided to ask a current faculty member or administrator at each university with ties to ACTR/American Councils to act as intermediary with the 44 alumni offices in this group. We sent the intermediary a request letter and a list of the alumni and asked them to personally contact their alumni office for assistance. Most schools agreed to assist when approached in this manner, although some institutional alumni offices replied that they were too busy to consider compiling the requested information.

As addresses came back to American Councils, the ACTR team sent out surveys accompanied by a cover letter explaining that the project was being conducted with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The letter touched on the main topics of interest, which are evident from the survey itself, but did not disclose any particular research hypotheses. Alumni were mailed an initial survey, and if no response was forthcoming, they were mailed one follow-up letter and survey 1-2 months after the initial contact.

As of November 1, 2000 American Councils has attempted to survey 1,640 out of 2,678 alumni. To date we have no alumni addresses for 1,038 people, or 39% of all alumni. These participants, therefore, received no survey. Of the alumni we have attempted to contact (N= 1,640), 43% have completed a survey (N=701). Parents have been especially helpful in providing new addresses and in some cases, new last names.³ Forty-eight percent of alumni have not responded to two survey mailings and 9% of surveys mailed have been returned because the post office was unable to locate the addressee. We think that the response rate has been tremendous for a highly mobile population that has had no contact with ACTR for many years, but remain interested in improving our response rate.

² Some schools requested a copy of the survey before releasing the list. Once they received the survey from us, we had no further difficulties obtaining the addresses.

³ Marital name changes have been an obvious challenge for us as well as the alumni associations.

Sample Demographics

Each alumna/us has the same code number in the Exchange Program Database and the Outbound Alumni Survey Database. As alumni returned their completed surveys, the survey data were matched to the original data on file for each person. This allowed us to consider a broader range of information than we could feasibly ask on one survey. It also allowed us to merge pre and post exchange test scores, information which students never saw, to career histories.

Several diagnostic tables have been compiled to compare the demographic profile of all outbound alumni (N=2,678) to that of the outbound alumni actually surveyed (N=701). (See Table 5.) We are extremely pleased to report that there is virtually no difference between our sample and the universe of outbound alumni with respect to gender, program type, and year of outbound exchange.

Gender	Alumni Population (N=2678)	Surveyed Population (N=701)
Male	40%	35%
Female	60%	65%
Program Type		
Spring	32%	33%
Fall	41%	42%
10 Month	3%	4%
Summer	24%	21%
Year of Outbound Exchange		
1975-79	5%	4%
1980-84	9%	12%
1985-89	24%	26%
1990-94	44%	38%
1995-99	19%	20%

Table 6 presents the language gain measures for the surveyed alumni and all outbound alumni. The profiles of the two populations are remarkably similar with respect to pre to post exchange listening, reading, and oral proficiency gains. This indicates that the survey respondents are *not* a self-

selected pool of exceptionally high gainers. Those with null gain and less gain were as likely to answer the alumni survey as those with substantial gain.

The fact that our sample reflects the typical range of exchange language gain will be important for our analysis of program management, language maintenance strategies, and career use of Russian. We can be confident that our alumni sample is representative of the total alumni population. In addition the surveyed population is large enough, (N=701), to allow for detailed analysis of important sub-groups within that population.

Table 6: Performance Comparison of Alumni Population & Surveyed Population			
Pre to Post Exchange Listening Proficiency Gain		Alumni Population (N=1989)	Surveyed Population (N=487)
Loss		2%	1%
Null Gain		45%	44%
Unit Gain		21%	21%
1 Threshold Gain		28%	29%
2 Threshold Gain		4%	5%
Pre to Post Exchange Reading Proficiency Gain		(N=2189)	(N=556)
Loss		8%	7%
Null Gain		44%	46%
Unit Gain		12%	11%
1 Threshold Gain		28%	28%
2 Threshold Gain		8%	8%
Pre to Post Exchange Oral Proficiency Gain		(N=1216)	(N=330)
Loss		2%	2%
Null Gain		21%	19%
Unit Gain		39%	40%
1 Threshold Gain		37%	38%
2 Threshold Gain		1%	1%
Note: The N fluctuates because scores were not gathered in all years. In addition, some participants lack either a pre or post exchange proficiency score, making it impossible to measure change.			

Survey Results

Preliminary survey results were presented at two conferences. Data for the first 520 respondents were presented at the June 16, 2000 conference on “Prospects for Bi-National Cooperation in Language Study and Research” held at American Councils in Washington, D.C. (Davidson and Lehmann, 2000). Essentially the same tables, re-calculated to include the current sample total of 701 respondents, were presented at the annual meeting of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages in Boston, Massachusetts (Lehmann and Davidson, 2000). The scope of the conference presentations was somewhat broader than this article.

In the present study, we have chosen to focus on the outbound overseas study experience: who goes on the exchange, how the profile has changed over time, the impact of the exchange on the respondent, and overall assessment of the importance of study abroad for intellectual and social development. Related studies on Russian specific career trajectories (Lehmann) and on language gain resulting from study abroad (Davidson) are forthcoming.

Profile of the Russian Outbound Exchange Student (1975-1999)

Just over half of our respondents planned to study Russian when they entered college. In our sample, 45 percent eventually became Russian majors, another 26 percent chose to double-major with Russian and another being one of their majors, 10 percent minored in Russian, 17 percent took Russian language courses while majoring in other departments, and 2 percent began studying Russian after college. (See Figure 1.)

The 1975-87 cohort was more likely to be comprised of Russian majors (54%) than the cohort traveling from 1995-99 (41% Russian majors), a trend that continues through 2005. As noted above, ACTR program participants during the first 15 years were more likely to be older, graduate-level, and more proficient in Russian at the time of their acceptance by ACTR than their counterparts of the past 15 years, as admission policies in Russia have broadened and access to study abroad increased among U. S. undergraduate students.⁴

Thirty percent of all alumni reported that the quality of the Russian program was an important factor in choosing their undergraduate institution. Most had not taken a course about Russia or the Soviet Union *before* taking up the study of the language. (See Table 7.)

⁴ For example, 191,321 U. S. students studied abroad in 2003-4, compared to half that number only five years ago. See www.opendoors.iienetwork.org for additional statistics and analysis.

Figure 1: Did you study Russian in college?
 American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
 (N=701)

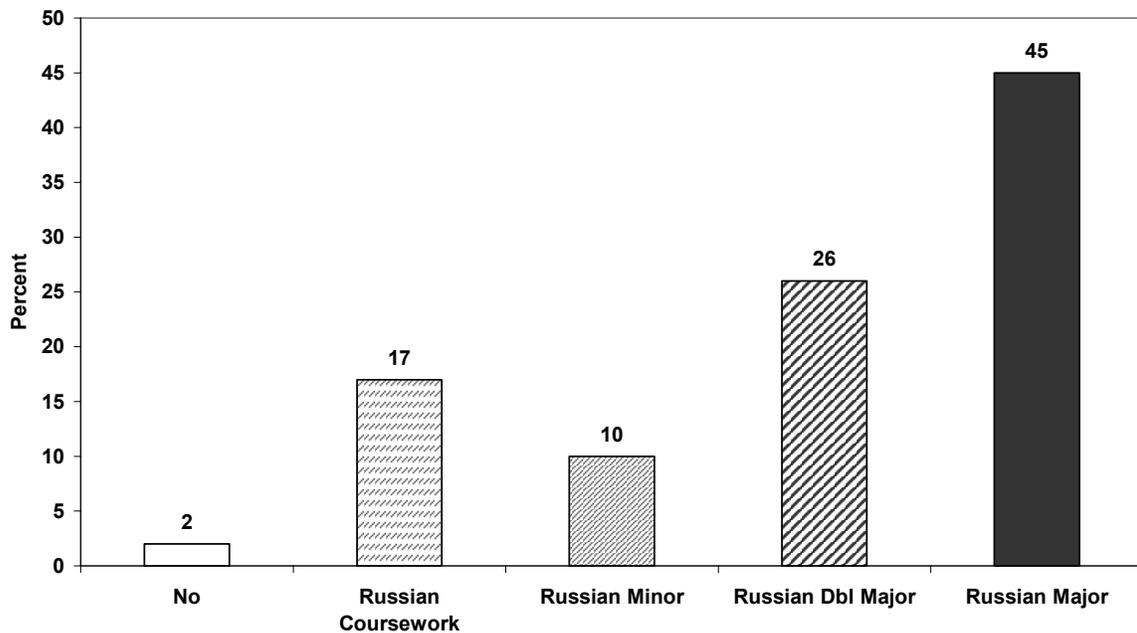


Table 7:
 Had you ever taken a course about Russia or the Soviet Union *before* you began studying Russian?

	% Yes
Russian History	10.3%
International Studies	7.5%
Russian Literature in Translation	7.3%
Russian Politics	4.1%
Russian Society	1.5%

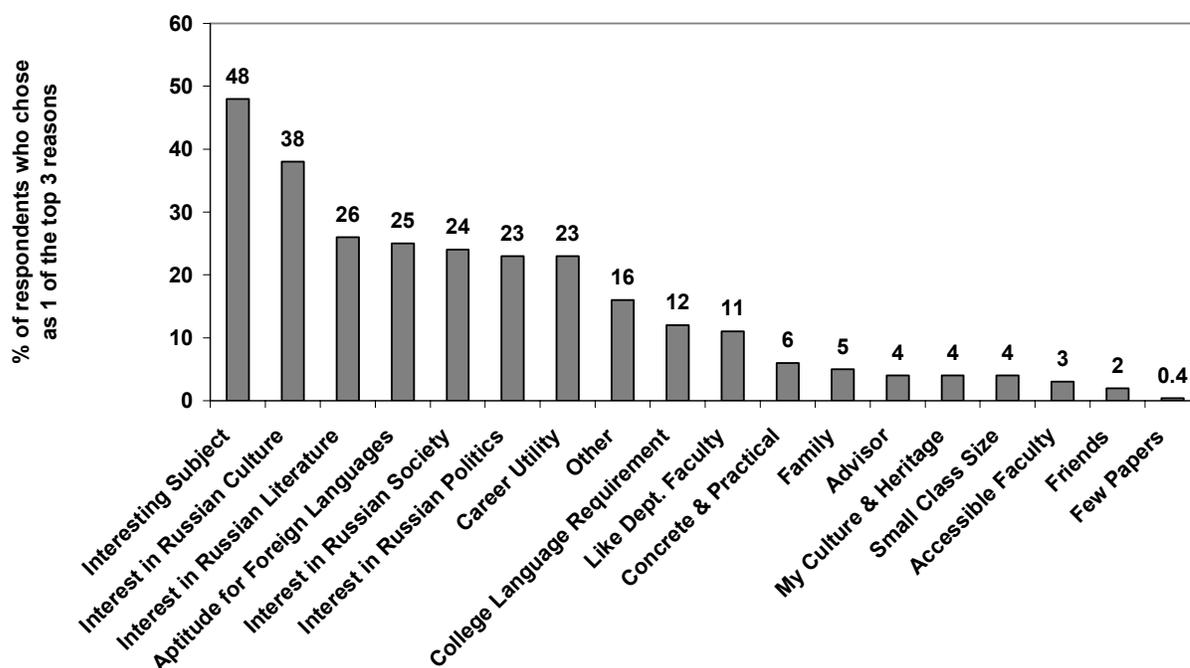
The cohort traveling from 1992-94 was the most likely to have taken a course about Russia or the Soviet Union before they began studying Russian. Thirty-four percent of the 1992-94 cohort had previously taken a course, as compared to 20% for the 1975-87 cohort, 24% for the 1988-91 cohort, and 26% for the 1995-99 cohort.

Alumni were asked to specify what had attracted them to the study of Russian in college. They were given a list of seventeen items plus a space to write in additional reasons not listed, and they were asked to rank the three most important reasons. In response to some preliminary work concerning major selection in college, which is being done at Harvard University, we organized five groups of answers: 1) **departmental character** – accessible or

likeable faculty, 2) **features which tend to distinguish language courses** – few papers, small class size, concrete and practical subject matter, 3) **instrumental reasons** – college language requirement and career utility, aptitude for foreign languages, 4) **social reasons** – interest in knowing about one’s heritage, advice from family, friends, or advisors, 5) and **intellectual reasons** –interest in Russian culture, literature, society, or politics, or simple overall interest in Russian.

The most popular reasons for choosing to study Russian in college were covered by the fifth group, intellectual reasons, as you can see from Figure 2.

Figure 2: Top 3 Reasons the Respondent Chose to Study Russian in College
 American Council's Outbound Alumni Survey
 (N=701)

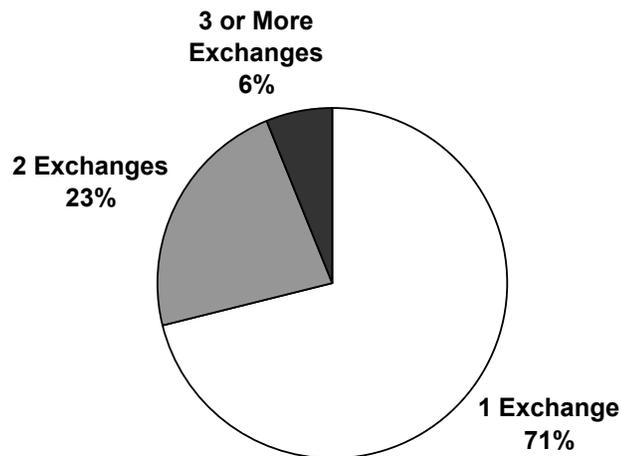


Almost half of the alumni chose Russian because the subject interested them. The second most popular answer, chosen by 38 percent, was that they were interested in Russian culture. Instrumental reasons were also moderately important in deciding to take Russian. Of the instrumental reasons, a perceived aptitude for foreign languages was twice as important as the presence

of a college language requirement. Factors relating to departmental character, course character, and social reasons ranked relatively low in importance.

Turning to the overseas study experience itself, we found that 71 percent of our alumni had been on one Russian language exchange, 23 percent had been on two, and 6 percent had been on three or more exchanges.

Figure 3: Total Number of Russian Language Exchanges per Respondent
American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
(N=701)



When asked, 45 percent of alumni reported that the first exchange to Russia was their first significant trip abroad. Those who went on exchange from 1988-91 were the most likely to report having previously taken a trip abroad, with only 37% never having traveled *significantly* abroad. Those who went on exchange from 1995-99 were the most likely to report that they had never taken a significant trip abroad (58%).

Of those persons reporting that the exchange was their first *significant* trip abroad, just over a third had *never* been outside of the U.S. and two thirds had only been on a short vacation outside of the U.S. prior to the Russian language exchange. The percentage of exchange students reporting *never* having been outside of the U.S. increases from 14% in the pre 1991 cohort to 20% in the 1992-94 cohort to 29% in the 1995-1999 cohort. The exchange was the first trip *to Russia* for 70 percent of alumni.

The practical opportunities for travel to Russia have varied greatly between 1975 and the present time. This is reflected in the answers alumni gave to the question “At the time you went on exchange, could you have traveled to Russia by other means?”

	Exchange Year			
	1975-1987	1988-1991	1992-1994	1995-1999
No, for financial reasons.	17%	25%	42%	60%
No, due to Soviet/Russian travel restrictions.	32%	32%	8%	3%
No, due to both financial reasons & Soviet /Russian travel restrictions.	48%	37%	25%	11%
Yes.	4%	7%	26%	27%
TOTAL	101%	101%	101%	101%

While students were much more likely to be able to arrange for their own travel to Russia after 1992, financial reasons have kept more recent students from traveling to Russia on their own. Soviet or Russian travel restrictions now present less of an obstacle to study abroad.

Impact of the Exchange

Literature on language study abroad programs has suggested that the experience has an impact on at least three aspects of education: 1) language ability, 2) cultural knowledge, and 3) character development.⁵ Our survey data, based on retrospective self-reporting, indicate that the program is regarded by participants as having had its greatest impact in the area of increased language proficiency, followed by increases in cultural knowledge and interest, and moderate increases in self-confidence and adaptability.

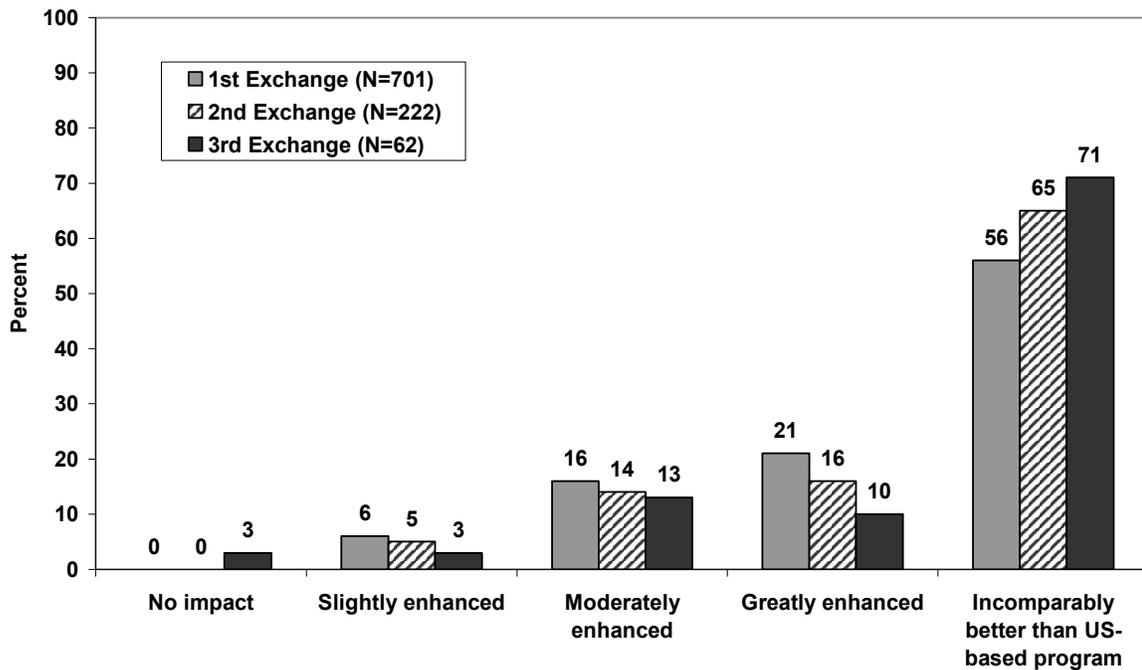
When asked “Considering all your Russian training, how would you describe the significance of the study abroad program for your language ability,” 56% of alumni said that the first exchange “enhanced my Russian language ability in a way that no program based in the United States could have.” See Figure 4. Forty-two percent of alumni report also having studied Russian in a summer program in the U.S. This group, who had studied Russian

⁵ There is a large literature examining the overall impact of study abroad on learners and careers but two recent studies, the Lincoln Commission Report (2005) <http://www.lincolncommission.org/index.html>; also, Dwyer’s “Charting the Impact of Studying Abroad,” *International Educator*, Winter 20-04, 14 – 20. For an overview of EU-focused research on the longitudinal effects of student mobility, see Maiworm, Friedhelm and Teichler, Ulrich (1996). *Study Abroad and Early Career: Experiences of Former ERASMUS Students*. London and Bristol, PA.: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

in language programs at home *and abroad*, was just as likely as those with *only* study abroad experience to rank study abroad above any comparable stateside language learning experience.

As with all questions evaluating the study abroad experience, alumni were asked to evaluate the impact of each exchange separately. Figure 4 shows that evaluation of the significance of study abroad for language development is even higher for those alumni who studied abroad multiple times.

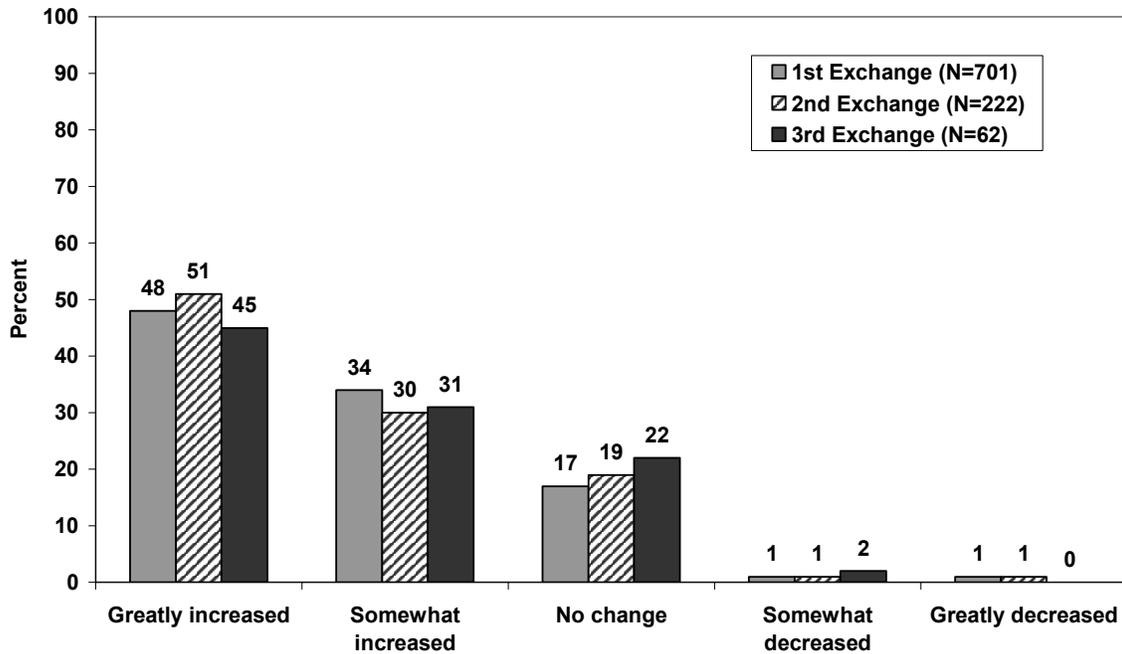
Figure 4: Considering all your Russian training, how would you describe the significance of the study abroad program for your language ability?
American Councils' Outbound Alumni Program
(N=701)



Half of alumni reported that the study abroad experience “greatly increased” their interest in events in the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of alumni report a positive increase in interest as a result of the exchange.⁶ See Figure 5.

⁶ This finding is consistent with those of the multi-institutional survey of the impact of study abroad on the development of undergraduate interest in international affairs, Carlson, J., Barbara Burn, John Useem, and David Yachimowicz, *Study Abroad. The Experience of American Undergraduates*. New York, Greenwood Press, 1990, 116.

Figure 5: To what extent did your interest in events in the NIS change as a result of the exchange program?
American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
(N=701)



When asked how the exchange affected their knowledge of Russian society, 67 percent reported that as a result of their first exchange their knowledge enhancement was greatly increased over what they had achieved in their U.S. based programs. Students on second and subsequent exchanges report an even greater increase in societal understanding. See Figure 6, below.

According to alumni, the exchange had a profound impact on their impression of their own society. The following are a sample of representative responses to the question: “Did your exchange experience change you attitude about the U.S.? If so, how?”

On several occasions, Russians would say “You can’t be an American. Americans are mean and bad people. But you’re just like us!” I explained that that was the same perception that Americans back home had of Russians. It opened my eyes to the attitudes that propaganda (in both nations) had fostered. (1981).

Yes, greatly. I began to question American historical, political and cultural mythology and institutions. At the same time my love and patriotism for the U.S. grew considerably. I became more of a critical, involved member of society. (1982)

Confirmed materialistic basis of culture. Pointed out our wasteful use of various resources. Pointed out the importance of cultural institutions and guiding principles of government. (1985)

I was able to approach our culture more critically – in depth. The streets of my beloved hometown seemed much smaller – this was quite a sensation that I recall to this day. (1986)

Deepened my appreciation for individual and group freedoms/rights. Gave me a new appreciation for the historical and contemporary realities in which cultural characteristics and economic behavior, standards of living, etc., are grounded. (1986)

I became very patriotic and pro-market, and defend the U.S. and the profit motive much more strongly. I am also more serious about voting. (1988)

After returning, I discovered that the U.S. has a great deal of bureaucracy too – I could deal with it, e.g. accomplish what I needed to accomplish, much more effectively after living in Russia. (1989)

I'm more appreciative of the American government and social institutions allowing for stability, yet open to evaluation and change. I'm more aware of the American belief in the idea that things can improve if an effort is made. At the same time, I admire the high value Russian culture places on literature and the arts as subjects worthy of pursuit in their own right. (1990)

Appreciated freedom and security in the U.S., but began to think about how the Russian experience gives them more compassion, humor, ability to cope regardless of the ineffectiveness of their institutions. (1990)

My interaction with Russians helped me gain a new appreciation of democracy and freedom of speech. I was also deeply affected by the value of relationships among the Russians. This strengthened my relationships at home. (1990)

How fortunate we are. How arrogant we are. How young our country is. (1990)

My first impression of the USSR was that they seemed to have an inordinate number of flags flying. Red flags decorated everything possible. When I got back to the states, I realized we flew a lot of flags too. I realized that we two nations are perhaps more similar than dissimilar. (1990)

How could it not? And how can I list all the ways? My eyes weren't just opened; they changed to chameleon eyes – I could see all ways at once, from multiple points of view.... Everybody should have to study abroad before they can call themselves American. Well, maybe that's extreme... (1991)

New appreciation for how simple/predictable life in the U.S. is. Appreciation for American principles of honesty, directness in communication. (1992)

It made me realize that I had taken a lot for granted -- EPA, FDA, and somewhat just the government. (1992)

It made me more sympathetic to those in the U.S. who do not speak English fluently or have recently immigrated. (1996)

Simultaneously devalued and valued American privacy, politeness, and emphasis on individuality. Admire and respect Russian hospitality over U.S. need for privacy and territory. Saw the U.S. through the "less advantaged" eyes of the Russian citizen. Grateful for our career and educational mobility. (1997)

I appreciate our governmental system, civil society and environmental regulations. I also now appreciate the freedom I have as a woman in the U.S. (1998)

Turning to character development, we found that more than three quarters of the alumni report that their self-confidence increased as a result of the exchange. A negligible percentage reported that their confidence decreased. See Figure 7.

More than half of alumni reported that their ability to adapt to new situations greatly increased as a result of the exchange. See Figure 8.

Figure 6: Considering all your Russian training, describe the significance of study abroad for you knowledge of Russian society
 American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
 (N=701)

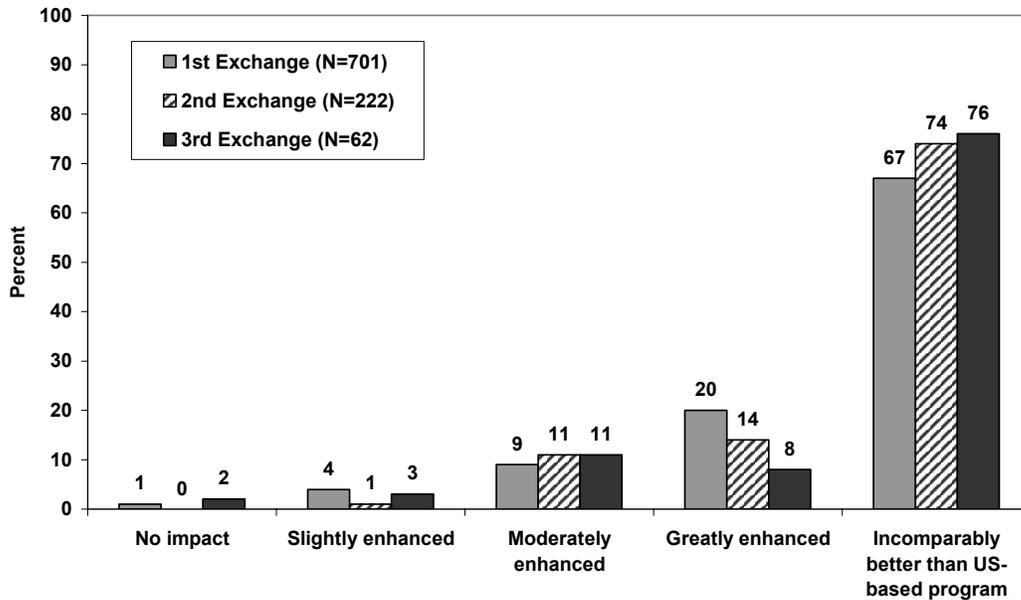


Figure 7: To what extent did your self-confidence change as a result of the exchange?
 American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
 (N=701)

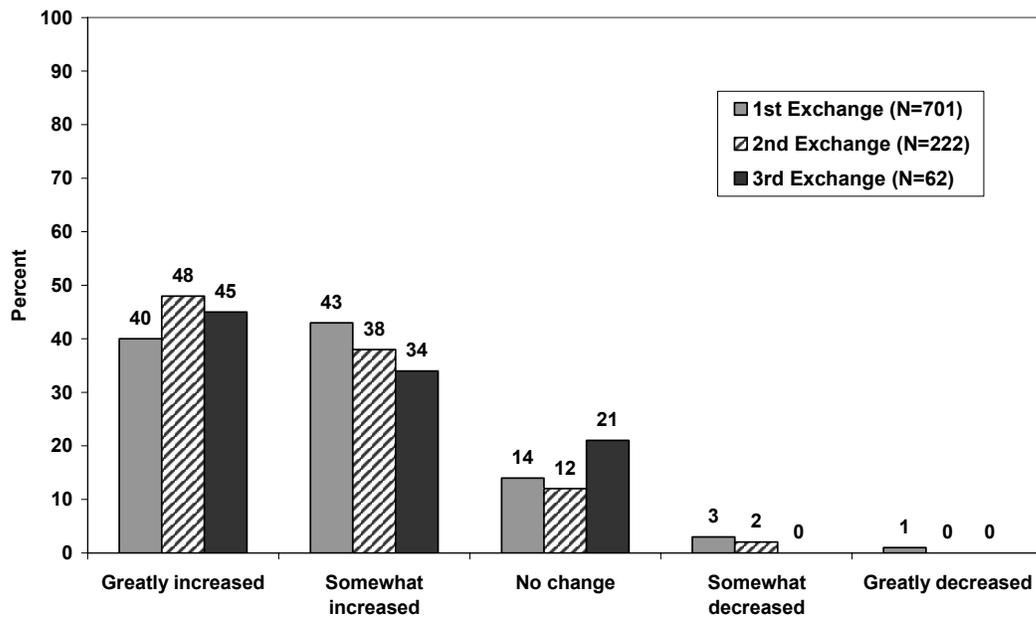
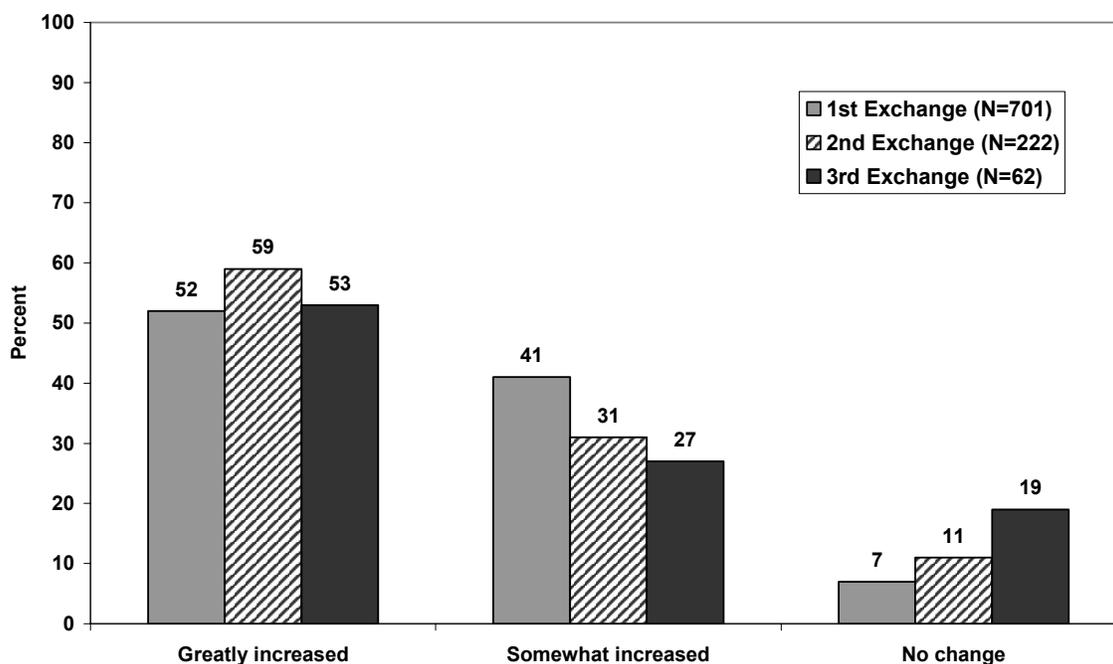


Figure 8: To what extent did your ability to adapt to new situations change as a result of the exchange?
American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
(N=701)



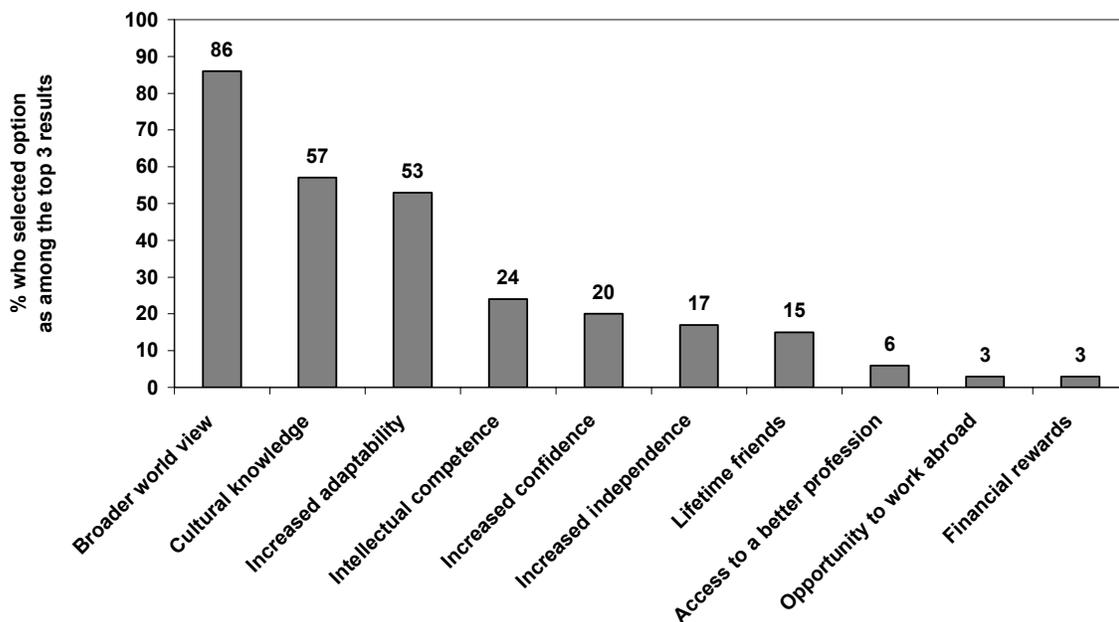
The increase was the greatest for those with little or no travel experience abroad. Sixty-three percent of those who had *never* previously traveled abroad reported a “great increase” in their ability to adapt to new situations, fifty-three percent of those who had previously only been abroad on short vacations reported a similar increase in their adaptability.

Survey responses indicate that few students remained either isolated in their dorms or exclusively in the company of Americans while on exchange. Somewhat surprising is the evidence found in Table 9 below that, regardless of the year of the exchange, students frequently went on impromptu excursions with Russians that they met.

Alumni were asked to report the top three results of their study abroad, aside from purely language gain. Eighty-six percent reported that they gained a broader worldview, 57 percent reported an increase in cultural knowledge, and 53 percent reported increased adaptability. At the other end of the spectrum, the option “increased financial rewards” drew little support (3 percent) and one derisive comment in the margin. See Figure 9.

	Exchange Year			
	1975-1987	1988-1991	1992-1994	1995-1999
Never.	9%	10%	10%	12%
Once, with other Americans.	2%	3%	4%	3%
A few times, with other Americans.	22%	22%	25%	28%
Frequently, always with other Americans.	3%	5%	5%	3%
Frequently, sometimes with other Americans.	38%	43%	37%	31%
Once, as the lone American.	4%	3%	1%	3%
A few times, as the lone American.	11%	10%	11%	11%
Frequently, as the lone American.	10%	4%	8%	9%

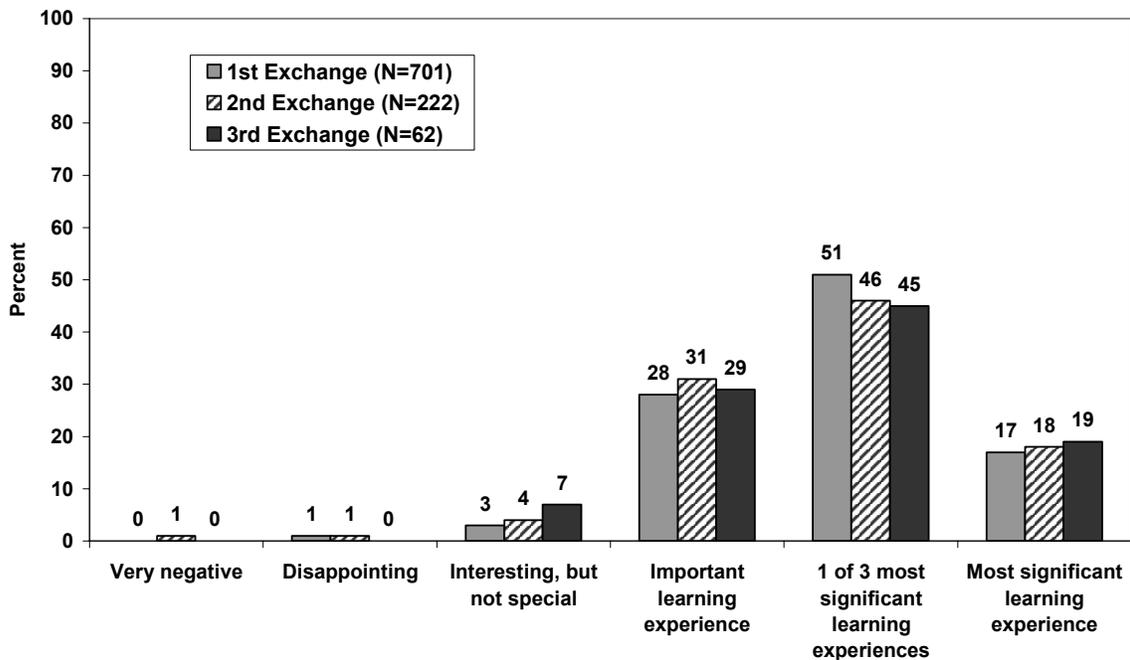
Figure 9: What were the top 3 results of study abroad, aside from purely language gain?
 American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
 (N=701)



Long Term Perspective on Language Exchanges

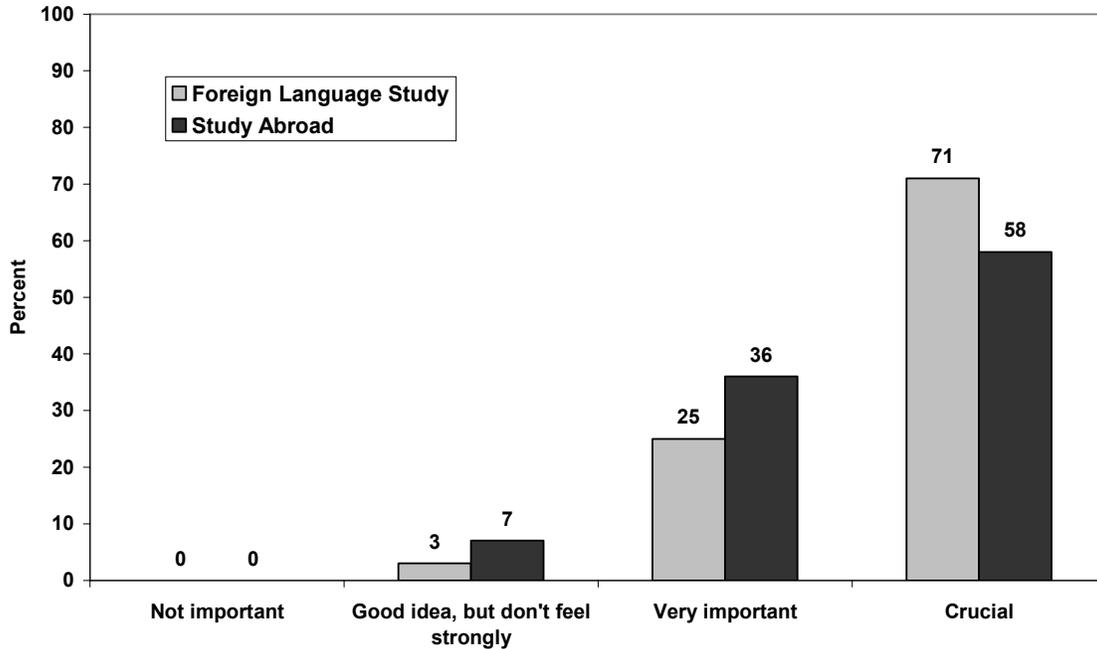
Almost sixty percent of alumni report having *attained* an advanced degree prior to the time of the survey. This is an extremely high figure, which will increase when some of those still in school complete their education. That said, 68 percent of alumni rate the first exchange as one of the three most significant learning experiences that they have had. Seventeen percent of all alumni say that the first exchange was *the* most significant learning experience that they ever had. Given the educational levels, career positions, and overall mobility rates of this group, the authors regard this as a particularly important finding for ACTR and serious overseas study programs more generally.

Figure 10: Looking back on your educational training, how would you evaluate your exchange experience?
 American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
 (N=701)



It is not surprising then that 71 percent of alumni are of the opinion that it is “crucial” for today’s young people to study a foreign language. Fifty-eight percent of alumni also say that it is “crucial” for today’s young people to study abroad. Opinions on this matter are very strong, with none of the alumni saying that foreign language study and study abroad are unimportant.

Figure 11: How important is it for today's young people to study a foreign language or study abroad?
American Councils' Outbound Alumni Survey
(N=701)



Alumni were given the opportunity to elaborate on the exchange experience by answering an open-ended question: “Looking back on the exchange, how did it benefit you personally or professionally.” Many mentioned that employers have been impressed by their study abroad as one of their credentials. Many also mentioned the friendships they formed and have maintained. The following are a sampling from the hundreds of answers received:

I grew up! I found out how capable I was in dealing with new challenges, of adapting to circumstances, of understanding and feeling empathy with “different” people who were really not so different from myself. (1977)

My experience in Russia is valuable as “practical experience” using the language. Employers have commented on this as they have reviewed my research. (1979)

Personally it clarified my thinking on a number of issues, in the way that being thrown into a culture that is very different from the one I’d grown up in, does. It provided a totally new perspective. (1985)

I became a more mature and independent person, and more employable because of those attributes, plus my language skills. (1985)

On my first trip, for the first time, I felt that I could really speak Russian. This was something I just had not expected in a classroom in the U.S. Russia was finally real to me, not something artificial in an artificial environment. (1988)

It increased my empathy and my patience. It made my approach to professional work more creative and independent. (1988)

Personally (and as a philosopher), I just got a new perspective on things in general. Professionally, my attending the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys was an eye-catcher on my first resume! (1990)

Personally, I can think of no other experience that gave me as much self-confidence. Even after 2 years away at college, I was very much my parents' child. That summer I grew up. (1991)

My greatest adventure. My time in Russia made me a better, more thoughtful person. It also left me with an enduring passion for Russian culture and literature. (1994)

I have realized that I love to learn. (1995)

It opened my eyes to a global economy with so many lifestyles, cultural differences, language differences, and political differences. (1996)

It taught me to relax a little, find the positive in difficult situations. (1998)

Very open to new things, customs, and understanding the roots of certain ethnic behavior in the work place. (1998)

Narrowed my focus on areas of professional interest and personal commitment. (1999)

Conclusion

The present report comes at a period of heightened American and international interest among scholars in SLA, and public policy makers in the role of overseas immersion learning in the formation of *long-term language learning careers* of professionals in a broad range of fields. One of the most striking findings to us, which will be discussed in detail in a future article, was the large percentage of alumni who work neither in academia nor government jobs. They have a much more diverse employment profile than had been previously assumed.

To restate one of the key findings of this article, 71 percent of alumni are of the opinion that it is “crucial” for today’s young people to study a foreign language. The present analysis indicates that American students

choose to take Russian for reasons relating both to intellectual interest and perceived aptitude for foreign languages. Both of these factors can be influenced over time by instruction, especially by high school and university-level teaching in the social sciences and the humanities; supporters of Russian programs are well advised to take this finding into account. The findings further suggest that students are more apt to tackle a difficult language like Russian, if they are motivated to learn more about the culture and have had a previous positive experience with foreign language training. Somewhat less influential to the decision of ACTR alumni to major in Russian is the character of the university department itself, the nature of specific course offerings, or the direct advice of friends, family, and deans.

Our data clearly demonstrate that *study abroad* has a great impact on *perceived* second language gain. Fifty-six percent of alumni said that the first exchange “enhanced my Russian language ability in a way that no program based in the United States could have.” Further, the evaluation of the significance of study abroad for language development is even higher for those alumni who studied abroad multiple times.

Study abroad is also understood by alumni as raising awareness and sharpening interest in world events and foreign cultures. The write-in comments from alumni clearly indicate that study abroad significantly enhances their appreciation of the United States as well as Russia. Personal character development is regarded by alumni as benefiting significantly as a result of the study abroad experience, with the benefits being most marked in those with limited travel abroad experience. The finding that a large percentage of students went on impromptu excursions with Russian friends opens up an area for further study regarding the impact of non-classroom situations on language gain.

Finally, it is clear both from the extraordinary response rate and the attitudes expressed in the surveys, that the alumni of exchange programs are passionate supporters of overseas advanced language study and exchanges. An astounding 58 percent of alumni hold the opinion that it is “crucial” for today’s young people to study abroad. Sixty-eight percent of alumni rate the first exchange as one of the three most significant learning experiences that they have had. Seventeen percent of all alumni say that the first exchange was *the* most significant learning experience that they ever had. Clearly American Councils/ACTR alumni feel strongly that foreign language study and study abroad are key elements in higher education, a finding that is consistent with a recent general U. S. survey of post-9-11 attitudes toward the value of study abroad, conducted by the American Council on Education.⁷

It is hoped that the ACTR Alumni Survey will contribute both a body of empirical data on the long-term impact of study abroad learning, as well as

⁷ In a survey conducted by the American Council on Education in 2002, 60% of undergraduates agreed that ALL students should have a study abroad experience sometime during their college or university careers, with numbers high still among Hispanic and African-American respondents, groups that only rarely take part in overseas study. See Madeline Green, *ACE Public Opinion Poll*, “One Year Later,” 9-2002, pg. 6)

bring new findings to the present discussion in the U. S. of the role study abroad. It is also possible that the methodology used here for identifying alumni subjects and collecting retrospective analyses of overseas learning will stimulate further longitudinal research on second language learning careers and the professional applications of second language competencies. The concerns of scholars in SLA and the foreign language field, of policy makers, and of funding agencies have never been more focused on identifying reliable means for maximizing student learning of world languages than at the present time.

Appendix 1: Outbound Alumni Databases

American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS

1. Exchange Program Data

Date Collected: Immediately pre and post exchange, 1976 to present.

Format: SPSS (Can be exported to Excel or programs that import data in ASCII or Dbase format). Most data are numeric with value labels assigned in SPSS.

Anonymous: No, each case is identified with the student's name. Students also have unique i.d. numbers.

Cases: 2,678 individual students who traveled on exchange. To the best of our knowledge (barring marital name changes), there are data on 2,678 separate people.

In addition, there are some additional entries for people who traveled on more than one ACTR exchange. In the event that a person went on multiple exchanges, he/she would be in the database several times. Since entries are *not* anonymous, an analyst can include all trips by all individuals, or exclude second and subsequent trips by an individual.

Number of Variables: Approximately 60

2. Alumni Survey Data

Date Collected: Spring and summer 2000

Format: SPSS (Can be exported to Excel or programs that import data in ASCII or Dbase format). Most data are numeric with value labels assigned in SPSS.

Anonymous: No, each case is identified with the student's name. Each Student has a unique id number which matches the one in the Exchange Program Data File, making it possible to merge data from the two databases.

Cases: 701.

As of 11/16/00:

701 have completed the alumni survey (26% of alumni)

794 have not responded to 2 survey mailings (30% of alumni)

145 surveys were returned because addressee moved (5% of alumni)

1038 alumni are missing and we have no address for them (39% of alumni)

Number of Variables: Approximately 172

Appendix 2: Exchange Program Database in Detail

Exchange Program Data: N=2,678

Number of Variables: Approximately 60

Types of Data:

Biographical

name, date of birth, gender, financial aid needed and granted academic affiliation, major, years of h.s. & college Russian

hours per week in the language lab

of other Slavic and non-Slavic languages known

of previous times in the FSU on immersion programs

semester traveled, program type (year, semester, summer)

Proficiency Pre-Testing

raw grammar score (1976-1990)

base grammar score (1976-1990)

% score grammar test (1984-1989)

qualifying exam score (1984 to present)

raw reading score (1976-1990)

base reading score (1976-1990)

% score reading test (1984-1989)

oral proficiency test (1983 to present)

listening proficiency test (1986 to present)

reading proficiency test (1986 to present)

Leadership and Adaptability Pre-Testing

native ability, 0 to 5 scale (1984 to present)

intellectual motivation, 0 to 5 scale (1984 to present)

willingness to use Russian, 0 to 5 scale (1984 to present)

adaptability to a new culture, 0 to 5 scale (1984 to present)
willingness to try new cultural things, 0 to 5 scale (1984 to present)
ability to work in a group, 0 to 5 scale (1985 to present)
leadership potential, 0 to 5 scale (1985 to present)

Post-Testing

oral proficiency test (1983 to present)
listening proficiency test (1986 to present)
reading proficiency test (1986 to present)

Appendix 3: Alumni Survey Database in Detail

Alumni Survey Data: N=701

Number of Variables: Approximately 172

Types of Data:

Biographical, educational, and employment history

Age, gender, date of birth
Educational history: schools attended, majors, degrees, date
Current employment sector, field, job title, location, work abroad

Pre-college Russian language training

Language use in the home, coursework
Residence in, or travel to, the FSU

College Russian language training

Coursework and reasons for studying Russian

U.S. summer language training in Russian

Program, year, course level, % in and out of class time in Russian

Graduate school training in Russian

Coursework, research in the FSU
Living arrangements during study in FSU

Russian language study abroad (All questions asked of up to 3 exchanges)

Program, year, length, course level, credit status
Reasons for study abroad, living arrangements, social life
Significance for language and knowledge of R. society
Significance for adaptability, self-confidence
Effect on attitude toward the U.S.
Evaluation and benefits

Additional Russian training *after* completing formal education

Program, intensive (yes/no), course level, length of course
Language maintenance strategies
Other languages formally and informally studied, when, extent

Current Russian language proficiency

- Speaking, reading, writing abilities
- Change in abilities since formal training ended
- Current use of Russian at home and in the workplace**
- Use in the home – with whom, language(s) employed
- On the job speaking, reading, writing, listening and understanding:
- Is Russian necessary? How often do you use each of these skills? Tasks that call for Russian. Skill level. Do colleagues use Russian as a native language? Has language or area studies knowledge aided your career?
- General employment preferences vis a` vis use of Russian**
- Are jobs/projects more desirable if they require Russian, travel to the FSU, or knowledge of Russian society?
- Total # of jobs, % that required Russian or knowledge of Russian society
- Attitude toward language study abroad**
- Intellectual impact, most important effect of exchanges

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