Implementing Inclusive Secondary Russian Language Exchange Programs

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1. Introduction

This discussion is a case study of the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) program's overseas and virtual Russian language offerings. The study also provides considerations and examples for embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion into the program design. Special attention is given to identifying Russian language opportunities for American high school students, expanding accessibility, centering program materials on inclusion, and embedding perspectives of the robust regional diversity within the Russian-speaking world into the NSLI-Y program. While the NSLI-Y program partners with many organizations in various locations, examples provided here focus on NSLI-Y programs implemented by American Councils for International Education, with a special focus on the summer and academic year programs located in Chisinau, Moldova, and on virtual programs.

2. Background

2.1 Overview of NSLI-Y and Russian programs

National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) is a program offered by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to promote critical language learning among American youth. NSLI-Y provides merit-based scholarships to high school students to participate in summer and academic year immersion programs. NSLI-Y immerses participants in the cultural life of the host community and provides intensive language instruction for eight different languages.

The goals of NSLI-Y are (1) to improve Americans' ability to engage with people through shared languages, (2) to develop a cadre of Americans with advanced linguistic skills and related cultural understanding who can use their skills to further international dialogue

and compete effectively in the global economy, (3) to provide a tangible incentive for learning and using foreign language by creating overseas language study opportunities for U.S. high school students, and (4) to spark a lifetime interest in foreign languages and cultures among American youth.

American Councils for International Education[1] is the lead organization in the administration and implementation of NSLI-Y, working in close collaboration with the U.S. Department of State and other partner organizations.[2] NSLI-Y strives to continually improve its program and better support a diverse student body ("Diversity and Inclusion," n.d.).

2.2 Russian program locations and delivery

NSLI-Y overseas immersion programs were implemented for Russian language learning in 2009. Summer and academic year immersion programs were based exclusively in the Russian Federation until 2014. Additional program sites in Estonia, Moldova, and Latvia were added in 2014 and 2015. NSLI-Y staff have deliberately designed the program to allow for the highest degree of Russian language immersion possible and, in the locations outside of the Russian Federation, to acknowledge other languages regularly spoken in those countries. In 2021 or 2022, Russian overseas language programs are expected to be offered in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. NSLI-Y supports students with various Russian language proficiency levels; some sites are dedicated to students with higher proficiency, and some are intended for novice speakers. Since 2009, approximately ninety participants have studied annually in Russian summer programs and fifteen in academic year programs. While overseas programs were suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19, the same number of participants were supported virtually.

In 2019, NSLI-Y launched Virtual NSLI-Y to provide introductory language and cultural learning experiences through virtual exchange. Virtual NSLI-Y programs are led by qualified language teachers in class sections of approximately ten students who are located throughout the U.S. Russian was one of four languages offered in the pilot effort in 2019–20 and was provided again in the second program cycle, in fall 2020. Over

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[1] Organization information can be found at https://www.americancouncils.org/.
[2] Program information can be found at https://www.nsliforyouth.org/.

forty students have studied introductory Russian since the program's inception in fall 2019.

3. Program evaluation methods

NSLI-Y administrators at American Councils for International Education coordinate closely with the U.S. Department of State and partner organizations on the program's evaluation activities. Evaluation activities are as follows:

(1) NSLI-Y participants complete pre- and post-program surveys.
(2) Teachers facilitate independent assessments.
(3) NSLI-Y participants complete post-program Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs).
(4) Providers, participants, and alumni supply written reports.
(5) NSLI-Y alumni complete biannual surveys to assess impacts and outcomes.

Participant surveys are one of the primary tools used to gather data on program effectiveness, including cultural learning and impact on motivation to study languages. Surveys also measure participant satisfaction, attitudinal and behavioral changes (participant and host), institutional adjustments, and materials development and related issues.

Language proficiency gains are also measured through assessments at the host institutions by language teachers and relevant exams in the host countries (i.e., TORFL, if applicable, particularly during academic year programs). All participants, excluding Virtual NSLI-Y participants, are required to complete an OPI post-program; participants with experience in the target language are required to complete a diagnostic OPI pre-program.

American Councils conducts a survey of all alumni every two to three years to assess the program's long-term impacts, outcomes related to program goals, and changes in attitudes and behaviors.

4. Inclusive approaches: Accessibility considerations

In NSLI-Y's overseas locations, including Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, infrastructure and resources may not be readily available for students with disabilities. Possible challenges in Russian-speaking environments include environmental and attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities as well as concepts of classroom accommodations that may be different from accommodations in U.S. classrooms.

It is important for program administrators to consider potential barriers and accommodations for students with disabilities or health conditions. Adequate planning supports a proactive approach to accessibility rather than a reactive approach. Administrators should begin planning early to allow time to brainstorm possible accommodation needs and solutions. Administrators should also network with local community members and organizations that may be familiar with effective, inclusive, and local resources and solutions.

Budgeting financial resources for accommodations is another critical practice, as this encourages program administrators to be prepared to accommodate participants with disabilities. According to Mobility International USA, 3–5 percent of the total program budget should be allocated for accommodations ("Reasonable Accommodations and Budgeting for Inclusion," n.d.). Budgeting for accessible design and accommodations is necessary in both recruitment efforts and program implementation. Budgeting for accommodations is a tangible way to foster inclusivity. Students, families, and teachers who have access to accessible recruitment materials (such as screen-reader enabled websites and captioned videos) may be more apt to apply to or participate in the program. Careful budgeting may also be cost-saving. For instance, one way to save on costs is to source locally rather than pay to ship them overseas.

In recent years, NSLI-Y administrators at American Councils for International Education have sent an "Accessibility and Medical Care for NSLI-Y Sites" survey to partners in host cities six months before the start of the program. Partners responded to questions related to accommodations, accessibility, and medical resources, including issues such as food allergies, school/city infrastructure, and local perceptions about people with disabilities. Partners were also encouraged to reach out to local Disabled People's Organizations and schools to inquire about available assistive devices or accommodations for students with disabilities. In the future, NSLI-Y aims to repeat this exercise every three years.

With the survey information, partners can gather and utilize necessary local resources for students with disabilities. If local resources are not available, partners can either source the materials from elsewhere or find alternative solutions that will enable all students to participate

in the program. Prior to the program, partners can also use information from the survey to help students have realistic expectations about accommodations in the host country and understand safety precautions (such as in the event of food allergies).

Students admitted to the NSLI-Y program must make written requests for accommodations within seven days of admission. Prompt submission of written requests increases the time to plan and secure accommodations or resources for students with disabilities. As students with the same disability may have different accommodation needs or preferences, written requests allow administrators to take a case-by-case approach to accommodations. For instance, some students who are blind or have low vision may prefer using a white cane, while others may prefer holding on to the arm of a guide. One student with a learning disability may require extended time on exams and need a staff member to facilitate this request with the language instructor, while another may prefer preferential seating in the classroom but not require staff support. Because preferences, needs, and circumstances vary, there is no one right method for inclusive accommodations. By encouraging open and proactive communication with the students, all parties can work together to accommodate needs based on circumstances.

Programmers may also wish to reach out in advance to local organizations led by people with disabilities (in the U.S. and overseas), or to university disability resource centers. Having connections with organizations will help programmers gain familiarity with resources, trends, and options for accessibility within various disability communities.

4.1 Accessibility considerations for virtual programming

As with overseas programming, it is important to start planning early for accessible virtual programs. This includes considering both students' abilities to physically and financially access technology as well as ensuring that the technology has the appropriate accessibility features enabled. Prior to the start of NSLI-Y's virtual programs, students are notified of the technological requirements for participation well in advance. Students can make needs-based requests for technology and can also receive stipends for internet connection. In this case, budgeting allows for resources to be allocated to students so they can participate without financial barriers.

For both virtual and overseas accommodations, it is important to discuss with students what tools they may need for instruction. Some students who are deaf or hard of hearing may prefer CART (communication access real-time translation, also known as real-time captioning), while others may prefer ASL interpreters, or both. In a Russian language classroom, students and staff may consider utilizing CART in both English and Russian. Students and staff may also consider offering the aid of an ASL interpreter who is fluent in both ASL and the local sign language (such as Russian Sign Language). If sign language interpretation is used, it is important to consider the student's existing knowledge and language goals related to Russian or local sign languages. If CART is available only in English, or if an interpreter signs only in ASL, they may still be useful in a Russian language classroom. For instance, CART or the ASL interpreter could convey to a student how a word is phonetically pronounced with English characters/signs. CART may also be used to support the literacy development of all students in the class.

To ensure that virtual classes are streamlined for all users, NSLI-Y staff completed trial sessions before the start of the program. These practice sessions incorporated relevant assistive devices, such as CART, with the platform for the virtual program. Practice sessions are recommended to troubleshoot and identify solutions for technology issues that may affect users. Screen sharing on certain platforms, for instance, may hide the closed captions. For virtual programs, it is best practice to reach out to organizations that specialize in assistive technology for educational settings.

Before and during the virtual program, it is important to communicate with vendors, students, and educators to improve the student experience and to support teachers in working with assistive technology in a virtual learning environment. Completing pre-training with teachers and students may be useful, especially if they have never worked with assistive devices or ASL interpreters in a virtual setting.

Because assistive devices and platforms are continuously changing, administrators should test the technology prior to each program cycle so that staff can confirm that the platform and devices are still functional for the students and support learning purposes. Staff members may

also consider connecting with organizations that specialize in inclusive technology. These organizations can provide resources and suggestions to increase accessibility for all students in virtual learning environments.

5. Inclusive approaches: Integrating diversity and inclusion into the student preprogram preparation phase

Program implementers aim to develop and integrate inclusive practices throughout the pre-program phase of overseas and virtual programming, including student-facing resources, virtual assignments, and orientation activities. Finalists who are placed with American Councils as their implementing organization receive a variety of preparatory resources upon acceptance, as well as instructions and a timeline to request disability accommodations. Program materials and preparation activities are intended to prepare students for their experiences abroad and explain the program's expectations for the students, promoting an inclusive learning environment.

Upon acceptance into the program and notification of their scholarship award, students are asked to complete a Finalist Update form, which gives them an additional opportunity to provide updated logistical information, clarify their names and pronouns, and request disability accommodations. Students have multiple opportunities to ask for support, and collecting this information enables staff to better provide individualized support and identify updates in information, such as changes in address due to unstable housing. The form closes with the following text, giving students the option to request a one-on-one call with program implementers:

> American Councils' staff members have a broad range of diverse experiences and backgrounds. Our colleagues speak many foreign languages, come from different countries and states, and represent many different identities. Some belong to the LGBTQI+ community, others have experience accommodating students with disabilities, and many have experience implementing programs in different countries and cultural environments. We are here to listen and provide support and resources to ensure that you have a positive NSLI-Y program experience.
>
> Please use the section below to share any additional information that you feel may affect your time overseas, keeping

in mind that the NSLI-Y program is an intensive and demanding program, which may at times be stressful. It is important that you are as open with us as possible, as this will only help us to ensure a safe and rewarding experience for you while abroad. If you feel more comfortable speaking directly to NSLI-Y program staff, please select the option in the next question.

In preparation for overseas programming, students are provided with a participant guide specific to their host site, which covers the basics of the NSLI-Y program, including an introduction to the host country and site, information about adjusting to the culture, suggestions for packing, and an overview of policies and expectations. This is required reading for all participants and serves as a primer for students who have not traveled abroad. Each guide includes a chapter called "Participant Diversity," in which students are asked to reflect on their identities and consider how they see themselves, how they are seen by others in their student cohorts and host communities, and how their identities may affect their experiences in their host countries. Students are introduced to concepts of intersectionality and visible and invisible identities. Considering the age of NSLI-Y students, each section of the guide concludes with a brief exercise or reflection assignment in a style similar to that of a high school textbook.

Students are also provided with information about diversity within their host countries regarding major ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Students learn about common attitudes toward LGBTQI+ individuals and any relevant laws in their host countries. Below is an example from the Participant Guide for students studying in Moldova, updated for 2021:

> Every year, students of different races and ethnicities successfully participate in the NSLI-Y program in Moldova. Some have reported that their race or ethnicity has had an impact on their experience there. Although modern Moldova is on the whole a fairly diverse country, this diversity might look different than how you are used to understanding diversity in the U.S. context. According to 2014 census results ("Populaţie" 2017, 41), about 75 percent of residents are Moldovan, and the remaining non-Moldovan residents are primarily Ukrainian or Russian immigrants or the children of immigrants. Other groups include

Romanian, Bulgarian, Gagauz, Roma, and others. Romanian is the official language of Moldova, and Russian is the designated language of intercultural communication. Romanian and Russian are both taught in schools, and Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz are also spoken in some areas.

The chapter includes links to stories on the NSLI-Y Interactive website written by alumni who studied the same language as well as to sites unaffiliated with the program so that students can read about the experiences and perspectives of other people with whom they may share aspects of their identities. NSLI-Y Interactive also hosts blog-style posts written by students across program years, implementing organizations, and languages. Former and current students write about their experiences on the program in their own words, and new and prospective participants can explore these posts in preparation for their own travels abroad. Students are also encouraged to reach out directly to program alumni.

In addition to exploring asynchronous readings and resources, students attend mandatory orientation sessions, either in person or virtually. One of these sessions is an alumni panel in which alumni share their backgrounds, experiences from the program, things they wish they had known before traveling, strategies for adjusting to the culture, and methods for coping with challenges abroad. NSLI-Y staff strive to ensure that these panels represent the diversity of NSLI-Y participants, inviting alumni of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and gender identities and sexualities.

For both overseas and virtual programming, interactive sessions are introduced with guidelines for respectful participant engagement. The agenda may include guidelines for creating an inclusive environment, being a part of a brave space (Ali 2017), promoting mutual respect and understanding, and encouraging students to draw from the soft skills they will develop through participation in the program.

After setting expectations and rules for engagement, staff members lead a discussion on diversity, identity, and intersectionality. Students engage in these topics through a variety of activities, including an activity called "Power Flower" ("Power Flower," n.d.). This activity encourages students to think about what contributes to and constitutes identity, to question what the dominant and nondominant identities are in their host

communities, and to think about how they relate to those identities. The primary objective of the activity is to build students' capacity to understand how layers of identity and privilege relate to dominant identities in their host countries. This activity should be facilitated in a manner that is respectful of students' comfort levels with sharing their identities and their reactions to the identities of their peers. This may include hosting smaller group discussions, making sharing opportunities optional, and using staff rather than students as models.

To reinforce the topics discussed in these sessions, students are provided with scenarios to discuss in small groups or in break-out rooms on a video-conferencing platform. Following is an example of a scenario assigned to students in 2020: "Your host father mentions that the Black Lives Matter movement and protests have made the national news in your host country. He asks what you think about this movement. He says such activity would never be permitted in the host country and does not understand what the issue is. How do you respond?"

Developing scenarios specific to the student group and relevant current events allows for greater customization and ensures that all examples are relevant to the student experience. In fall 2020, students discussed the prompts in small groups and strategized ways to handle the hypothetical situation. Students shared their perspectives and considered how their personal identities affected how they understood the situation. After group discussions, students returned to the main session, and the meeting concluded with salient takeaways on identity, diversity, and intersectionality and provided a space for students to ask any remaining questions.

Through these various activities and approaches in the preprogram phase, the program's goal is to meet the needs of each student and to acknowledge the differences in experiences among students of different ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities, and disabilities. A parallel goal is to introduce students to the diversity within their host countries and to help them understand diversity outside of U.S. contexts.

6. Inclusive approaches: Embedding diverse regional perspectives in program design

In promoting inclusion, the NSLI-Y program embeds diverse perspectives from the Russian-speaking world into its design. While great attention

is rightfully being paid to increasing the diversity of American students in study abroad programs through recruitment, there is inadequate discussion on how to extend diverse perspectives through the experience in the host country and expose young learners of Russian to diversity in the Russian-speaking world. The Russian-speaking world is immensely diverse; over 190 ethnic groups reside in the Russian Federation alone ("Russian Federation" 2020). Through cultural programming and community engagement, NSLI-Y Russian language programs introduce participants to various groups in the host country and provide students with the additional opportunity to learn about *russkaia kul'tura (*Russian culture) that is not necessarily *Rossiiskaia* (that of the Russian Federation), and vice versa. The NSLI-Y program has routinely connected its Russian language learners with diverse and underrepresented groups through both overseas and virtual programming. The following paragraphs will explore examples of programming from a NSLI-Y academic year program site in Chisinau, Moldova.

6.1 Program design: In-country engagement with regional diversity

Weekly cultural excursions are an integral component of the NSLI-Y program. Like in other academic programs abroad, these include excursions to regional sites of interest, visits to local museums and historic sites, and workshops. The program's cultural component provides a structured opportunity for students to investigate diverse perspectives and identities in their host communities.

Despite its small area, Moldova's population reflects great ethnic diversity ("Populaţie" 2017, 41, 58–59). The program includes an excursion to Gagauzia—an autonomous republic in Southern Moldova known for its Gagauz population, a Turkic minority. On this excursion, students take a walking tour of the region's capital, Comrat, which provides the opportunity to see the city and understand the Turkic influence on the region, namely through trilingual writing (Gagauz, Russian, and Romanian) in public spaces. As student groups are relatively uncommon in the city, local people are often eager to interact with the students. The key component of the excursion is a visit to a local horse farm, where students explore an important aspect of regional culture. The farm owner gives a tour and uses his artwork to speak about raising horses and his childhood experiences in Gagauzia. The excursion concludes with regional cuisine

served at a local restaurant, deliberately selected to optimize students' cultural learning during the meal.

Cultural excursions within the host city also allow students to explore religious diversity. As in much of Eastern Europe, the majority of people in Moldova are Orthodox Christian. However, Moldova is home to many religions. The Kishinev pogrom, for instance, holds great significance in Jewish history ("Populaţie" 2017, 43; Ireland 2009). The NSLI-Y program seeks to inform students about religious groups in Moldova through an excursion focusing on Jewish culture and history in Chisinau. The group tours the city's largest synagogue, meets with the rabbi for a discussion and an opportunity to ask questions about Judaism in Moldova, and explores notable sites on a walking tour led by a local guide. Many past participants, including those from Jewish backgrounds, have engaged with the local community through the synagogue's community center.

Regional diversity can also be effectively incorporated throughout all levels of program design. This is demonstrated by the lunch schedule in the NSLI-Y academic year Russian program in Moldova. Through the program's group lunch component, students gather three times per week at a restaurant selected by program staff. Exploration of regional cuisines, including Moldovan, Georgian, and Uzbek, has historically been included in some of these lunches. In the 2019–20 program, local staff recognized the opportunity to expand this component and further introduce students to regional ethnic diversity through foodways. The following considerations were incorporated into the program:

(1) Administrators purposefully selected venues and ensured that partner restaurants understood the program's goals for the lunch, offered appropriate dishes, and could accommodate dietary restrictions.

(2) Administrators chose dishes that were popular, well-known, or representative of the regional culture.

(3) Students learned the Russian names of the dishes and details about them. When relevant, staff members also explained a dish's cultural or historic context. For example, staff members demonstrated how to properly eat *khinkali* and shared the legends of *khachapuri po-adjarski* during a Georgian-themed lunch.

Through this group lunch series, students gained knowledge about

and were motivated to engage with regional diversity, as demonstrated by their familiarity with regional dishes and increased excitement about these lunches compared to previous cohorts.

In all excursions and cultural activities, safety and ethical considerations must be prioritized. Direct student engagement with diverse and marginalized communities is not always possible. For example, students have expressed interest in learning more about the breakaway region of Transnistria or engaging with members of the local LGBTQI+ community. In the case of Transnistria, however, the region's existence as a de facto separate entity prohibits travel from a logistic and safety standpoint; there are limitations on U.S. government services and access to telecommunication systems and public services because Transnistria operates on independent networks. In the case of LGBTQI+ communities, people with these identities remain marginalized in Moldova, as in many other Russian-speaking countries. Moldova's annual Pride parade has experienced violence and heavy police presence in recent years, making it unsafe for program participants to attend. Program implementers must assess the risks involved with any activity. Alternative programming may be provided in such cases where implementers determine an activity is unsafe and prohibit student participation, as with Moldova's annual Pride parade. Program implementors have instead incorporated activities that allow students to explore these topics in a controlled environment, such as by welcoming trusted guest speakers who can reflect on these topics. The program has benefited from American Councils' robust networks in the local community.

6.2 Program design: Promoting community engagement

In addition to structured cultural programming, program implementers aim to promote community engagement through individual community service and unstructured extracurricular activities. The NSLI-Y program has required community service in overseas academic year programs and in short-term summer programs. For Russian language groups, students fulfill this aspect of the program through required group activities, optional program-arranged activities, and students' independently arranged activities. This program element is discussed here as, notably, many past projects have centered on inclusion,

skill-building, and promotion of equitable values for marginalized and underserved groups.

The NSLI-Y Russian program in Moldova has developed a robust network of partner organizations for group-based and independent participant volunteer work. Many academic year students are active in community service and continue to serve well beyond the formal program requirement. In 2018–20, each academic year student completed an average of thirty-two hours of community service over the course of the program.[4] Students placed in Chisinau, Moldova, have engaged with organizations such as the Jewish Community Center, the U.S. Embassy's America House Culture Center, local volunteer and youth centers, and English language centers.

During the 2019–20 program cycle, students were involved with two projects in particular: Russian Sign Language initiatives and financially accessible English classes. Students active in the Russian Sign Language project took regular classes and assisted with events with the intention of learning more about Russian Sign Language and promoting awareness of the local Deaf community. These events were held at and hosted by the Jewish Community Center. Several students noted that the project also benefitted their Russian language learning, as they learned vocabulary in both spoken Russian and Russian Sign Language. Students found that associating a sign with a new word allowed them to better commit the vocabulary to memory. While the COVID-19 pandemic prevented students from assisting at a large event in May 2020 as originally intended, students nonetheless were able to participate in some smaller events for the Deaf community prior to their evacuation back to the U.S. in March 2020.

Several students also taught no-cost English classes to provide accessible language lessons for those whose financial circumstances may have otherwise been a barrier. Though language centers are commonplace in Moldova, lessons are often expensive. Students developed lesson plans and conducted classes with the help of experienced English teachers, which ensured the quality of these programs. When reflecting on his engagement in this project, one student (academic year 2019–20) noted in a program meeting, "I feel that I'm making a lasting impact on the local community through [the volunteer center's] English classes. A lot of the students wouldn't be able to learn the language otherwise, but the free

community classes are financially accessible for them." Such initiatives empower local language learners by providing equity of opportunity regardless of socioeconomic background.

While arranging community engagement initiatives is more challenging in the virtual space, it is still feasible. For example, several students conducted virtual presentations on American life at cultural centers in their virtual host countries. The program also partnered students with English language learners from marginalized and underserved groups in several Russian-speaking countries. Activities included presentations on U.S. culture to support the goals of the English learners' program and informal discussions to allow the learners to practice speaking with a native English speaker, an opportunity the English learners may not otherwise have had.

One activity that is particularly successful in the virtual space is connecting program participants with language partners. Students volunteered to meet and speak English with participants in the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program ("Future Leaders Exchange: At-a-Glance," n.d.).[5] In 2020, FLEX students from Europe and Eurasia who initially planned to study abroad in the United States were unable to do so due to the COVID-19 pandemic. NSLI-Y students who found themselves in similar situations empathized with the FLEX students and were eager to support the FLEX program by practicing English and sharing American culture with the FLEX students. Similarly, many NSLI-Y students also volunteered to partner with participants of the Prep4Success program, which prepares students in Turkmenistan for higher education in the United States ("Prep4Success," n.d.). Through this initiative, the NSLI-Y and Prep4Success programs mutually supported one another's goals through cultural and linguistic exchange. Many students have continued to meet with their language partners beyond the project's formal conclusion. In both cases, NSLI-Y students further engaged with diversity in the Russian-speaking world as they met with language partners from a wide variety of countries and regions, including those that are often underrepresented in the Russian-speaking community or are less well-known in the United States.

As discussed here, intentional integration of cultural programming and community engagement in Russian exchange programs provides language learners a structured environment in which they can explore

diversity within the Russian-speaking world. These initiatives enhance students' learning experiences and spark their desire to continue to explore these ideas. Program staff members have noted increased student interest in additional Russian language learning programs based in less commonly represented locations, including Central Asia. These cultural program components have a lasting impact, as evidenced by post-program surveys and students' future plans.

6.3 Program design: Virtual engagement with regional diversity

Like many exchange programs, NSLI-Y pivoted to virtual programming during the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously discussed, NSLI-Y also began a new initiative exclusively focused on virtual language instruction for novice students prior to the pandemic, in 2019 ("Virtual NSLI-Y," n.d.). While the virtual learning environment poses challenges for immersion learning, one benefit is that students can easily connect with speakers with whom they would not otherwise be acquainted, including speakers representing marginalized ethnic groups and a wide array of Russian-speaking regions. NSLI-Y virtual offerings have included cultural activities aimed at developing students' understanding of regional diversity and minority ethnic groups in the greater Russian-speaking world.

Virtual cultural programming mirrors the themes and goals of similar in-country programming. For example, the program has successfully implemented cooking lessons on regional cuisines. These lessons focus on dishes from host countries or from the greater Russian-speaking community. Easy-to-prepare recipes with commonplace ingredients are featured for ease of access. As always, students should be reminded to take a "safety-first" approach in their cooking. Implementers should also consider ingredient substitutes for regional specialties to make the workshop more accessible.

The 2020–21 NSLI-Y Russian academic year virtual program has encouraged students to explore themes related to the diversity of the Russian-speaking world through independent research projects. Each week, students are assigned a theme to investigate and then prepare a brief presentation in Russian on their selected topics. Staff members purposefully select themes that encourage students to explore regional diversity. For example, students were prompted to research landmarks

and cuisines representing different Russian-speaking regions. Guided independent research projects allowed students to take ownership of practicing Russian speech and developing public speaking skills. During a final discussion reflecting on their key takeaways from the culture class, students noted that the projects expanded their views of Eastern Europe.

Inviting guest speakers for virtual cultural events also presents a valuable opportunity for students to hear from individuals representing diverse regions and marginalized ethnic groups in the Russian-speaking community. One program participant (virtual summer intensive, 2020) stated the following during a class reflection activity: "Learning and hearing from all the different guest speakers, it really struck me how diverse Eastern Europe is. It was really helpful for me, because I [originally] had this extremely narrow view of all of Eastern European culture, and I feel through the culture classes I learned there are so many types of culture, food, and traditions. That was amazing for me!"

Through virtual programming in 2020–21, NSLI-Y students have connected with guest speakers, students, and language partners from Bălți, Moldova; Yakutsk, Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Russia; Ashgabat, Turkmenistan; and Taraz, Kazakhstan. These opportunities allow students to learn about the perspectives and cultures of underrepresented or ethnically diverse groups. Guest speakers and virtual student exchange opportunities are identified through existing networks and other exchange programs implemented by American Councils.

In addition to virtual language exchange opportunities, activities in the 2020–21 program included a Sakha instrument demonstration presented by a woman in the Sakha republic, a *Martisor*[6] crafting workshop with students in Bălți, Moldova, and a student-led lesson on the Thanksgiving holiday with students in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Such initiatives allow participants to learn about regional cultures and perspectives from peers who are similarly passionate about international exchange and eager to share about their daily lives, interests, and home regions.

The NSLI-Y program will consider incorporating similar virtual events with populations from diverse Russian-speaking regions into in-person programming when the program is reinstated. Such

opportunities could enrich the students' experiences as part of their predeparture preparation or during the winter months, which have fewer scheduled cultural programming activities and events due to weather conditions.

7. Results and outcomes

7.1 Language gains

Through overseas language immersion and formal language instruction, NSLI-Y participants have made notable gains in language proficiency as measured by the ACTFL proficiency scale (Swender, Conrad, and Vicars 2012). As shown in figure 1, pre-program oral proficiency diagnostic ratings vary, typically from Novice to Intermediate Mid. Annually, approximately 40–45 percent of participants begin the NSLI-Y program as complete novices in their target languages. Key highlights of language gains across the NSLI-Y programs include the following:

(1) In 2012–19, 85 percent of academic year overseas program participants achieved post-program oral proficiency ratings of Intermediate High or above.

(2) In 2012–19, 10 percent of academic year overseas program participants achieved post-program oral proficiency ratings of Advanced High or Superior.

(3) In 2012–19, 85 percent of summer overseas program participants achieved post-program oral proficiency ratings of Novice High to Advanced Mid ("Language Gains," n.d.).

The Virtual NSLI-Y program, exclusively for beginning language learners, expects participants to reach Novice Low levels by the end of the ten-week program. While virtual participants do not complete a post-program OPI, instructors assessed the participants' language gains and found that 90 percent had met the language proficiency expectations.

As a result of COVID-19, 2020 NSLI-Y Virtual Summer Intensive proficiency goals were adjusted in relation to goals for in-country immersion programs. Beginning language learners were expected to reach Novice Mid by the end of the fifty-contact-hour program. Students with preprogram proficiency in the target language were generally expected to advance by one OPI sublevel. Despite the virtual delivery, 83 percent of participants met or exceeded post-program OPI expectations.
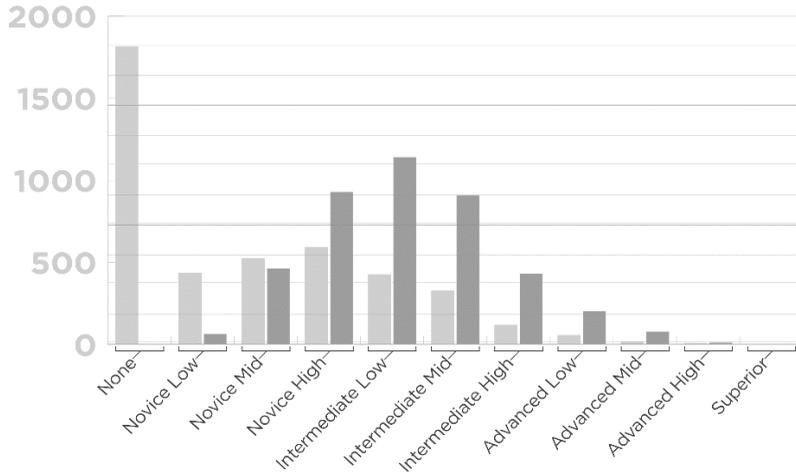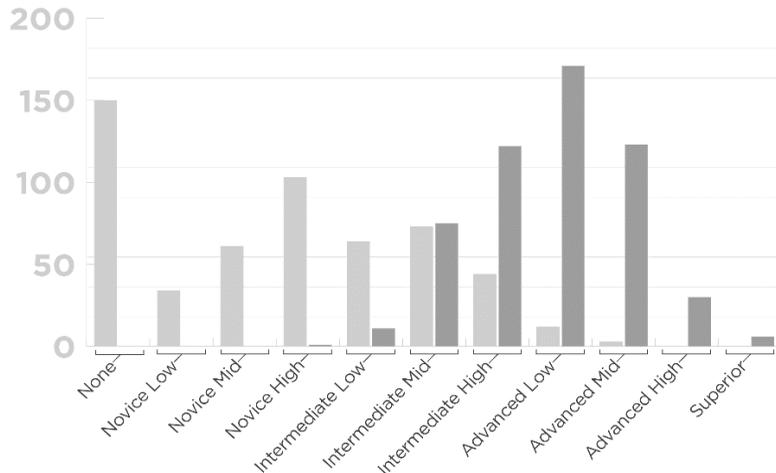
Figure 1. Oral Proficiency Interview results for students who participated in academic year and summer NSLI-Y programs from 2012 to 2019

7.2 Program impact

NSLI-Y participants and alumni are surveyed by program staff on learning gains, satisfaction with their program experiences, and impact. Additionally, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Evaluation Division has evaluated NSLI-Y through an external provider (Dexis Consulting Group 2020). The evaluation was conducted over a period of multiple years, and the report was completed in 2020; it is worth noting that NSLI-Y's virtual programs were not included in the time period of the evaluation.

Several key findings were identified from this external evaluation. Alumni were satisfied with their experience with the NSLI-Y program, with over 95 percent noting that the program met or exceeded their expectations. Further, NSLI-Y has proven to be an effective educational experience: 100 percent of alumni improved their competencies in the languages studied and their understanding of the life and culture within their host countries. Notably, 80 percent of alumni continued their foreign language study after returning from their NSLI-Y experiences. Additionally, alumni noted that the program improved their ability to interact with other people; 97 percent of alumni reported that they applied general intercultural competency skills in their interactions. A Russian program alumnus noted the following in an NSLI-Y staff-implemented alumni survey in 2018: "[NSLI-Y] has given me the toolkit to navigate cultural differences and effectively collaborate with people from different backgrounds."

8. Conclusion

In the implementation of the NSLI-Y Russian language program, several opportunities and trends have been identified: (1) The NSLI-Y program has created access to Russian language study for American high school students. (2) Program implementers must actively and intentionally consider accessibility in program design. (3) Just as the NSLI-Y program aims to represent the diversity of the United States, the program is positioned to introduce American students to the diversity of the Russian-speaking world. (4) Students who participate in the program make significant Russian language gains on the ACTFL oral proficiency scale. (5) The majority of program alumni express interest in continuing their language and regional studies.

This discussion has explored applied examples of program implementation to demonstrate methods of intentionally considering accessibility and incorporating diverse themes into program design. While there is a need for more data on high school study abroad programs and further development of inclusive practices, the examples outlined here provide insights into the effects of such programming. In particular, the qualitative descriptions detailed here model creative solutions for holistically embedding themes of diversity into all phases of students' experiences.

The NSLI-Y program's work with diversity, equity, and inclusion is an ongoing and evolving process. This work will continue to require intentional inclusive program design, quality language instruction, regular evaluations, innovation, and commitment to the students and communities served by the program.

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