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## **Diversity and Inclusion in the Study Abroad Context: Recruiting Data and On-Program Support Initiatives for the CLS Russian Institutes**

**JEANETTE OWEN, NELLIE MANIS**

### **1. Introduction**

The authors submit this paper in the interest of sharing the perspectives and experiences of practitioners in the field of study abroad and to contribute to the discussion of best practices related to the recruitment, preparation, and support of underrepresented students with examples related to the study of Russian. The authors recognize that further work on study abroad programming for underrepresented students is necessary, and this contribution is intended to foster further discussion across the field.

The authors will draw on experience administering the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) Program, a program of the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The CLS Program is a fully funded 8-week intensive overseas language and cultural immersion program for U.S. undergraduate and graduate students. In the CLS Program, students can study one of 15 languages, including Russian, with funding provided by the U.S. government and supported in its implementation by American Councils for International Education (<https://clscholarship.org/>). The CLS Program seeks to increase the number of Americans with the advanced linguistic skills critical to national security. It also strives to promote American competitiveness and economic prosperity; increase engagement and mutual understanding with the people of other countries; and develop overseas capacity for the study of critical languages.

### **2. Diversity and access**

The CLS Program is publicly funded under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961, also known as the Fulbright-Hays Act, and is expected to be “balanced and representative of the diversity of

political, social and cultural life in the United States and abroad” (Notice of Funding Opportunity SFOP0007818 2021, 4). The diversity statement of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) defines diversity in the United States through a range of identities that have historically been disadvantaged:

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the United States Department of State strives to ensure that its efforts reflect the diversity of U.S. society and societies abroad. The Bureau seeks and encourages the involvement of people from traditionally underrepresented audiences in all its grants, programs and other activities and in its workforce and workplace. Opportunities are open to people regardless of their race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, geographic location, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity. The Bureau is committed to fairness, equity and inclusion. (Diversity Statement, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs n.d.)

Many of these classes and identities are considered to be historically underrepresented (referring to African American, American Indian/Alaska Native and Latino students) in education abroad practice or historically underserved (populations of students who have not been recruited to take part in study abroad) as outlined in the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* (The Forum on Education Abroad 2020) and noted as such generally by education abroad organizations including Diversity Abroad, the Forum on Education Abroad, and NAFSA.

The CLS Program works to achieve diversity among its scholars to create a balanced representation of the United States abroad and to contribute to the diverse experiences that inform cultural exchange and learning. The program seeks to be accessible to all students, including those with disabilities, first-generation students, and Pell grant recipients. The CLS Program also considers the structural and historical contexts that have contributed to disproportionate access to study abroad and works to ensure fair access to the opportunities offered by the program. Finally, the program strives to deliver inclusive programming that prepares all students to benefit from opportunities to learn by establishing an open and welcoming environment and supporting students who may face a range of social, cultural, or economic challenges before or during the program.

### 3. CLS demographic data

As a large, federally funded program with national recruitment efforts that yield approximately 5,000 applications per year, the CLS Program has collected data that may provide some context on the racial and ethnic diversity of U.S. students pursuing the study of Russian in institutions of higher education across the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Application data from the CLS Program are compared against the *Open Doors* report, prepared by the Institute of International Education (Institute of International Education 2021). The *Open Doors* report publishes data from an annual survey of higher education institutions regarding the number of U.S. students studying abroad each year. Though the report relies on limited self-reported demographic data provided by institutions, *Open Doors* serves as the most comprehensive breakdown of U.S. student mobility based on race, ethnicity, gender, degree type, institution type, field of study, and disability status. Options for reporting on race and ethnicity include the categories of White, Hispanic or Latino(a), Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Multiracial, and American Indian or Alaska Native. Demographic data on sexual orientation and non-binary gender identities have not been included, to date. Applicants to the CLS Program provide similar demographic information, with additional questions regarding status as first-generation college students, Pell grant recipients, and veterans.

While differences in demographic questions and the methodology used for data collection limits direct one-to-one comparisons to the *Open Doors* report, a limited comparison can be made (Figure 1) by sorting the data to determine the broad category of “non-White” and then further comparing categories of identity that overlap. Non-White, in this case, refers to individuals who identify in any category other than White or in addition to White.

According to the *Open Doors* data from the 2012–2013 academic year, 24% of the total number of U.S. study abroad participants identified as non-White (including identities such as African American, Hispanic/Latino(a), Asian and Pacific Islander, and Multiracial), increasing to 31% by 2018–2019, the most recent data available (Institute of International

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<sup>1</sup> The program currently issues approximately 80–110 scholarships for the study of Arabic and Chinese, 50–80 for Korean and Russian, and 10–30 for the remaining languages. The program typically receives approximately 1,000–1,200 applications for Arabic, 600–700 for Chinese, 500–600 for Russian, and 350–450 for Japanese.

Education 2021). In the same period, by comparison, for the 2013 CLS Program, 31% of participants identified as non-White, increasing to over 40% by 2019 (Critical Language Scholarship Program 2021). This comparison shows both the general upward trend for diversity among study abroad participants and how the CLS Program outpaces the national trends reflected in the *Open Doors* data.

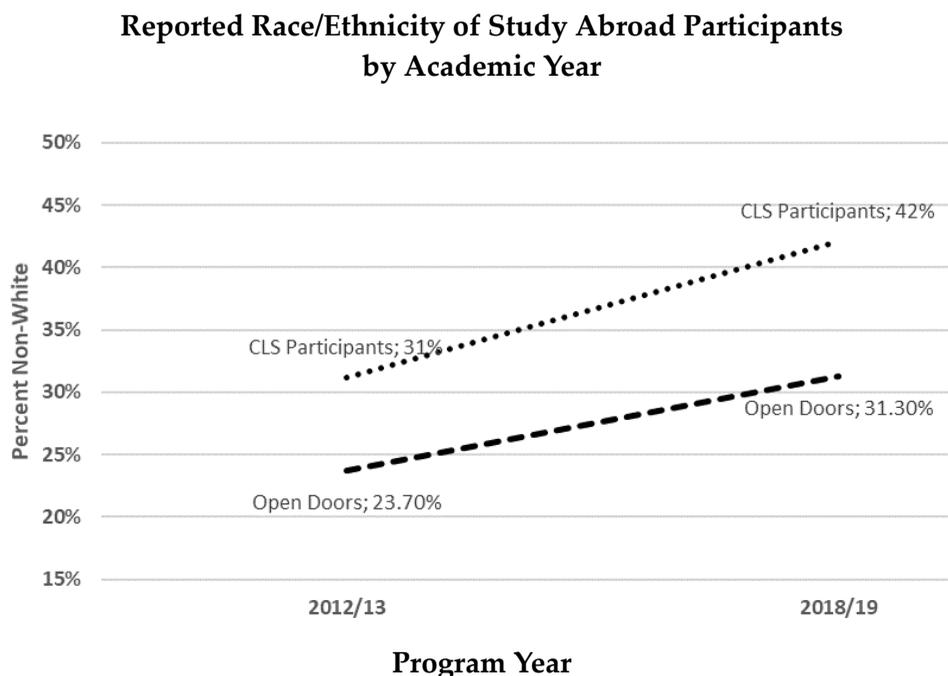
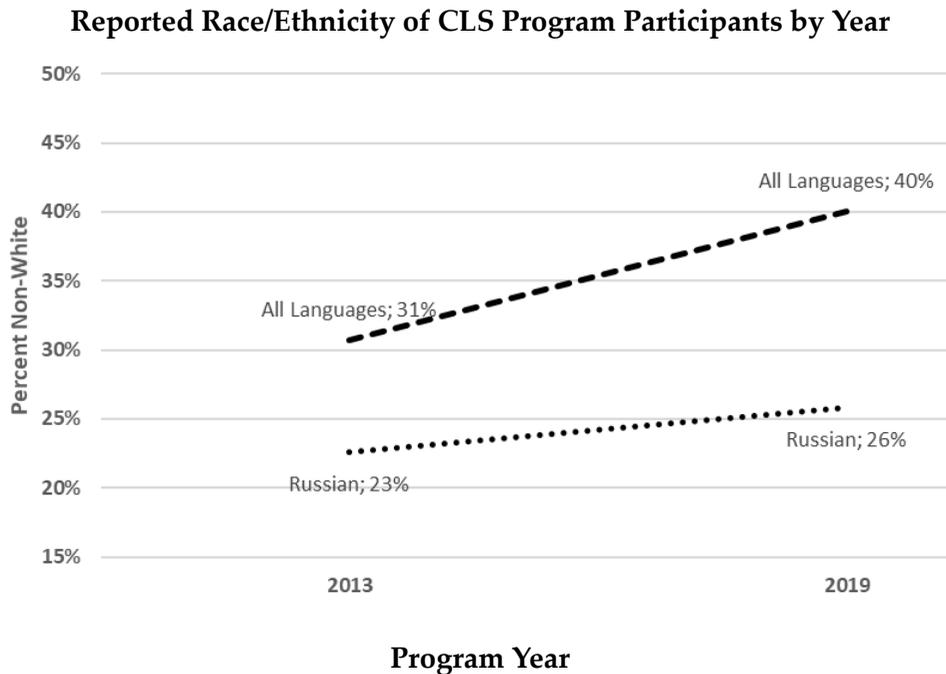


Figure 1. Comparison of Open Doors and CLS self-identified Non-White participants, 2012–2019

While funding is key in making study abroad opportunities more accessible, increasing the diversity of the CLS applicant pool has also taken sustained engagement over time. Budget constraints have led initiatives to focus more on broad outreach goals, such as building relationships with underrepresented institutions, than on recruiting for individual languages. A breakdown of CLS application data by language reveals differences in the relative diversity of the applicant pool: (1) applicants to the Russian programs show fewer diversity markers overall compared to those who choose other languages offered

and (2) increases in the overall diversity of Russian language applicants over time were relatively modest. Because scholarships for Russian were limited to applicants with two or more years of college-level Russian study (until 2019, when it was reduced to one year), the analysis was restricted to those applying to the equivalent of third-year (intermediate) and fourth-year (advanced) levels for the language programs that do not have prerequisites.



*Figure 2. CLS Self-identified Non-White participants studying Russian, 2013–2019*

As noted in figure 2, in 2013 31% of all CLS participants at the intermediate and advanced levels identified as non-White, increasing to 40% by 2019. Among Russian language participants, only 23% identified as non-White in 2013, increasing slightly to 26% by 2019.<sup>2</sup>

A further breakdown of the CLS application data shows that

<sup>2</sup> Of the 15 languages supported, some include beginning levels, while other languages, including Russian, have prerequisites. To account for this, only data for applicants with prior language study were included in the analysis. As of 2019, Russian requires only one year of prior study instead of two.

relatively fewer students applying to study Russian selected identities other than White compared to other languages offered by the CLS Program. An analysis of application data across four years (2018–2021) shows that only 3% of applicants to the Russian program identified as Black or African American, compared to 9% for Chinese and 13% for Japanese, the other two languages with two years of college-level study required. For that same time frame, 8% of Russian applicants identified as Hispanic or Latino(a) compared to 10% for Chinese and 13% for Japanese; similarly, 6% of applicants to the Russian program selected multiracial compared to 10% of applicants for Chinese and 13% for Japanese. A smaller percentage of applicants identified as Asian (Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander are counted separately) for Russian (6%) compared to applicants for the study of Chinese (26%) and Japanese (22%).

Given that participation is restricted to U.S. students with prior college-level study of Russian or the equivalent, data for the CLS Russian program may suggest either similar trends in demographics for those enrolled in Russian classes across U.S. campuses (given the prerequisite for prior language study) or students' reservations regarding opportunities to study abroad in Russia. This finding may be a result of multiple factors, including the accessibility of Russian language coursework across the United States or the distribution of Russian programs across institution types, such as community colleges and minority serving institutions (MSIs). Anecdotally, some study abroad representatives have expressed reservations regarding the safety of students of color in Russia, in some cases citing safety concerns that were prevalent in the era following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and which may also contribute to the CLS application demographics. This finding suggests that funding alone may not be sufficient for addressing underrepresentation in study abroad.

#### **4. Recruitment and selection strategies**

The data provided by the *Open Doors* report, as well as the work of national organizations and practitioners in the field inform CLS Program efforts to recruit applicants from underrepresented institutions, such as community colleges, MSIs, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges and Universities. Similar initiatives seek

to increase participation among student populations traditionally underrepresented in study abroad.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of equity, recognizing that resources for advising on the application process are limited for institutions underrepresented in study abroad, such as community colleges, which may lack both fellowship advisors and study abroad departments, CLS Program staff prepare application tips and host webinars to provide support and advice for the application process, which students may not be able to access through their home campuses.

In 2013, CLS Program staff worked with a committee of faculty and staff from a range of institution types to review and revise the application and selection process for the program. As a result, the application was redesigned in 2014 to make it more equitable by decreasing the emphasis on prior awards and achievements, and by replacing a long essay prompt—which may have advantaged students attending institutions with ready access to fully staffed fellowships offices that contribute to the preparation of highly polished essays—with a series of shorter, focused questions that ask students about their ability to adapt to new environments and the unique perspectives they may bring as citizen ambassadors, thereby providing space to talk about a diversity of experience. The CLS Program values diversity not only in its applicants and participants but also in the college and university faculty, staff, and administrators who serve as evaluators in the CLS Program selection process. Overall, the 2021 CLS selection process involved 375 professionals representing 46 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico from 270 institutions, including 25 community colleges and 70 MSIs.

### **5. Inclusive student support**

Concurrent with recruitment initiatives, the CLS Program seeks to prepare all students for the program experience so that they benefit from the opportunity. CLS Program resources and support networks are informed by discussions in the field of education abroad, the experience of program staff and host institutions, feedback from participants, and ongoing input from alumni.

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<sup>3</sup> Additional demographic questions were added to the CLS application related to first generation students, Pell grant recipients, and veterans. More recently, the application was revised to include expanded options related to gender identity and a question regarding identification as a Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color (BIPOC).

This effort to prepare students holds across a wide range of topics, including health and safety, cultural adjustment, academics, management of anxiety and depression, and other areas that may pose challenges for participants. These topics are provided and discussed as part of the work of preparing students for their experience abroad. The CLS Program applies this same principle to support underrepresented students and reduce the barriers that may negatively impact their ability to succeed—to learn in the classroom, participate on program activities, and engage in the community. Initiatives to reduce barriers involve working with host institutions, developing pre-program materials and orientations, and connecting with program staff and alumni networks to provide support to students throughout the program.

## **6. Working with host institutions**

While the CLS Program recognizes the benefits of cultural and academic immersion, it also devotes considerable attention to understanding U.S. students on the part of host institution staff. Program staff work with international partners through yearly dialogue during the planning phase as well as through an annual meeting of representatives from host institutions. The annual planning meeting provides a venue for program staff to explain the expectations and requirements for hosting a federally funded program and for program staff and partners to share lessons learned and discuss new approaches to supporting students.

As program implementers, CLS staff work with host institutions to identify and mitigate barriers or negative experiences that detract from students' overall well-being and ability to engage. Monitoring and evaluation tools include weekly meetings with participants led by program staff, mid-program check-ins with each student, and regular program surveys completed by students. Program surveys incorporate questions about how identity has shaped students' program experience. Insights from the field of education abroad and feedback from participants, alumni, and program staff form the basis for continued efforts to strengthen orientation materials for teachers, program staff, host families or roommates, and language partners (peers drawn from the host community) to better understand the challenges diverse American students face overseas and to better support students when they have negative encounters in the host community.

Discussions between program staff and host institutions take place over time and shift to address changing needs. In the earliest years of the program, the work involved developing a curriculum and pedagogical materials for some of the languages, integrating learner-centered teaching methodologies, and toolkits for building host family networks. Most recently program implementers have focused on mental health and emotional wellness needs of participants, as well as the needs of underrepresented students. This includes talking about the various identities that CLS students may bring to the program and discussing common challenges that students may experience on the program, such as otherness fatigue, double-adapting within the host community as well as within the student group, unwelcome attention or touching, being considered “not American enough” or, conversely, for some heritage learners, being considered “too American.” Program implementers can also provide suggestions on how best to support students by being an empathic listener, providing resources and support, and by taking steps to avoid dismissing or invalidating the students’ experiences.

The U.S. Department of State recognizes capacity building as one of the primary objectives of the CLS Program by including it in the federal call for proposals to implement the CLS Program. (Notice of Funding Opportunity SFOP0007818 2021, 4). Capacity building requires sustained effort and involves multiple initiatives. CLS staff work closely and regularly with representatives from 20–25 overseas institutions on common challenges, with a particular emphasis on bringing together program directors from all program sites to exchange ideas and strategies, and to help orient new partners to the program. Work with partners is generally an iterative process—a single training session has limited ability to ensure an environment free of harassment, discrimination, or microaggressions. Therefore, the CLS Program takes steps to integrate the topic of diversity into every annual meeting of representatives from each host institution, typically in tandem with a guest speaker who focuses on providing a deeper understanding of the needs of specific underrepresented groups, such as students of color, participants with disabilities, and emergency mental health first aid, among others. These sessions aim to provide insights into the historical, cultural, and social contexts of diversity for those responsible for directing the trainings at the home institution

and provide time for questions that host institution directors have, based on training materials or past incidents.

Program staff also provide partners with information that is more specific to the experiences of CLS students while on the program. Individual or small-group discussions and feedback based on language or region are often more effective at introducing these materials than large-group sessions with partners from around the world. These small-group discussions include overviews of different identities that students bring to the program and the common challenges or sources of friction that are often referenced by study abroad participants broadly and CLS participants specifically as part of their responses in regular program surveys. Small-group discussion also involves nuances of the specific host community culture, which can involve both long-standing historical trends and new elements, such as the passage of specific laws or election of officials with specific attitudes toward minority groups.

Examples explored during training sessions draw directly from the experiences of study abroad students, whether from the CLS Program or from discussions in the field of international education, and they serve as a framework for the training materials developed for use with faculty, staff, host families and language partners. In part, the materials are also drawn from mid- and post-program surveys, which include questions about how identity and cohesion in the participant group has affected the program experience.

In particular instances, with partners who have developed a better sense of the issues of diversity and inclusion over time, the program has carefully initiated conversations aimed to address common practices that students often find alienating, such as an imbalance in calling on students based on gender, the use of materials based on stereotypes, or the use of overtly heteronormative essay prompts (“my ideal husband/wife”). The revision of essay prompts focuses on avoiding situations where students must decide either to suppress their identity or take on a forced personal conversation with teachers and classmates. While in some countries, including Russia, discussions about sexual orientation or gender identity may be raised, the CLS Program operates in countries where such discussions would not be deemed suitable for the classroom and any such conversations with the partner about the curriculum and materials used is by nature dependent on the social and cultural environment of the host

community. Each host institution is based in a social and cultural context that has developed over time.

In a recent training case, program staff worked with Dr. Olga Klimova of the University of Pittsburgh and Dr. Iza Savenkova of Dickenson College to share ideas for integrating a broader range of the human experience into the lesson plan to help students from various backgrounds feel more included and to increase students' awareness of diverse experiences within the host country. Some examples include introducing the concepts of *многодетная семья* 'large family' and *мать одиночка* 'single mother' to a lesson on family, or introducing images and examples based on the experiences of different races, ethnicities, and religions within the Russian-speaking world.

Much as is the case for study abroad participants, host institution staff learn best when information is put into practice—by interacting with students, hearing their perspectives, and reviewing information that is firmly based in the students' experiences. As with any training program, change often comes from practice processing real-life situations, opportunities for reflection, and continued dialogue.

## **7. Student preparation and support**

The CLS Program is open to U.S. citizens from any academic major and from any type of U.S. institution accredited at the undergraduate or graduate levels, so materials and support structures have been designed for students from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. However, best practices for supporting study abroad students undergo constant realignment to accommodate new challenges affecting student success, frequently mirroring initiatives on U.S. campuses. In recent years, study abroad practitioners have focused on providing mental health resources, strategies for building resiliency, and support for participants traveling to countries with widespread gender-based street harassment. Support for underrepresented students seeks to address specific challenges faced by students across a range of identities, including those from minoritized racial and ethnic groups, first-generation students, students needing disability accommodations, students requesting adjustments for religious observances, heritage speakers, and students with unique gender identities and sexual orientations. Students, like all people, have multiple identities, some visible and some invisible. Students' different identities

also impact their experiences during study abroad to different degrees. It is important to keep in mind that students with intersecting identities (such as race and sexual orientation or religious affiliation) may encounter different and sometimes more specific stereotypes or safety concerns.

Preparing students to be successful in their new host communities requires continually assessing and adjusting to meet changing needs. The CLS Program recognizes that an equitable approach addresses the specific concerns and needs of underrepresented students in response to the challenges they may face by providing resources and support networks to draw on before, during and after the program.

CLS Program staff have identified three key goals for preparing students for their experience abroad: (1) Setting realistic expectations, (2) identifying support networks and (3) building ties in the host community. While these goals inform the work of preparing all students, the program continues to further develop resources and support systems to improve the experiences of underrepresented students.

### *7.1 Setting expectations*

To prepare students for the study abroad experience, program staff work to better align student expectations with the real-life challenges that are part of the study abroad experience. Most students express excitement and enthusiasm, even alongside some common anxieties and trepidation. While setting realistic expectations, it is important not to dampen interest or create fear but to fill in some of the gaps in the context of historical and contemporary life in the host communities. Program materials and recorded alumni interviews that outline both the highlights as well as some of the frustrations that come with an intensive immersion program can be important tools. These tools also talk about some common challenges that some students may experience because of their identities. This work runs parallel to initiatives to help students from all backgrounds develop realistic and manageable expectations for a rigorous and challenging program experience—past students reported that these tools led to students feeling less surprised by and better prepared to overcome frustrations or feelings of doubt about their ability to succeed.

The CLS Program only accepts Russian language students who have taken at least one year of college-level Russian or the equivalent prior to participation in the program. As with participants across the

entire program, many who have not spent time abroad may not have considered in depth what it might be like to live in a country with social and cultural norms that have developed in a different historical, cultural, and social context from that of the United States. And while students may be aware of or may have experienced racism, sexism, ableism, harassment, and discrimination in the United States, they may not have thought in advance about how such incidents might occur while they are abroad, with what frequency or degree of openness, and how they might respond if they either view or experience such incidents. Responding to student feedback on the subject, program staff has taken steps to provide more information about these topics before the program begins. Efforts to prepare students for questions about how their identities may affect the program experience include creating and sharing information in a variety of formats and venues, such as general and site-specific handbooks, live webinars and video recordings, and meetings with program staff and alumni, all of which incorporate discussions about race and ethnicity, religion, attitudes about sexual orientation and gender identities, and the experiences of heritage speakers, among other topics.

For example, the CLS handbook is a significant source of information that students can digest at their own pace. The first part of the handbook is an open-access online resource intended for all students regardless of the language they will study during the program that devotes significant attention to identity and how students of some backgrounds may be perceived abroad. For example, an introduction to how race may be perceived differently outside of the U.S. is included in the “Maintaining Your Identity Abroad” section:

In many overseas countries, an “American” is understood to be Caucasian. For non-White CLS participants, this can be a unique challenge. People from your host community may be less familiar with Americans with Asian, Hispanic or Latin-American, Indigenous, or African heritage, and they may lack knowledge and context when it comes to the acceptable use of language or the history of race in the United States. As a result, they may ask questions or provide commentary that would be considered offensive or discriminatory in the United States. (CLS Online Participant Handbook 2021, 33)

The second part of the handbook, which is specific to the location of the program site, provides a more in-depth discussion about what to expect. It focuses first on strategies for staying physically safe during the program (as part of the duty of care responsibility that program providers hold), and which are applicable for all students—including students of color, who may receive more attention, some of which can be, at times, aggressive. The materials also discuss microaggressions, which tend to be more prevalent than acts of aggression or overt hostility. These examples provide a framework for encounters related to identity that students may have as part of an immersive study abroad experience. With time, students who immerse themselves in the host community will likely find themselves participating in discussions and uncovering perspectives that are nuanced and complex, based on the history of their host country and their companions' individual experiences.

Simply providing context does not mean that students will not experience uncomfortable situations. Program staff also provide concrete strategies for students to employ in situations that do not readily accommodate their identities. For example, there may be strong expectations in some countries that men and women will marry a member of the opposite sex relatively early in their young adult life, and there is less exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships than is common in the U.S. Students are likely to receive questions during their time in Russia and Kyrgyzstan (and many other CLS host countries) about their familial relations, as well as their own marital status and intention to marry and have children. For many U.S. students, direct questions about marriage and children from strangers or new acquaintances may be uncomfortable, but for LGBTQ+ students, such questions may raise additional concerns related to safety or unwelcome attention. Program resources and recommendations from alumni offer some advice about how students can redirect these types of conversations in situations where a student may not want to share personal information, and may call to mind strategies students have used to navigate challenging situations in the U.S. For example, students may consider redirecting a conversation about their marriage prospects by talking about their current focus on their academic or professional goals, or talking about life in the United States, such as when people typically get married, how one finds a spouse, or how

weddings are celebrated rather than responding to personal questions. This strategy is not presented as a directive to avoid conversations on the topic of gender identity or sexual orientation but rather as a strategy to help participants manage a conversation they are not interested in pursuing.

In addition to providing advice, program staff also seek to provide authentic perspectives of program alumni or others who have lived in the host community to talk about the role of identity:

*My Experience as an African American in Kyrgyzstan*

For me, living in Kyrgyzstan as a minority was both a challenging and rewarding experience. Naturally, being African American in Central Asia brought me a lot of attention. This was sometimes good and sometimes bad. Often times, I found myself being the first African American that people had ever seen or had the chance to interact with. Sometimes just walking down the street was a unique experience as people would usually stare and sometimes take pictures. Unfortunately, there are times when people base their perception of African Americans on stereotypes from the media. However, being African American in Kyrgyzstan was a huge opportunity to educate people on what Americans look like and about African American culture. By the end...I was giving lectures and presentations about African American history and diversity in America. I would especially encourage other minorities to go and experience Kyrgyzstan. Not only will it be an exciting learning experience, but you can also teach others. I think Kyrgyz people are very curious, hospitable, and interested in other cultures and YOUR presence can be instrumental in breaking any negative stereotypes and misconceptions that some people may have. (CLS Participant Handbook, Kyrgyzstan 2019, 14).<sup>4</sup>

Alumni testimonials can be deeply impactful, as an individual's concrete experience or perspective tends to be more powerful than generalities from staff about what "may" happen on the program. Such stories can be the catalyst for an incoming student's critical analysis of challenges that they may face on the program and may encourage them to

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<sup>4</sup> Quote from Peace Corps volunteer Drake Mayo.

reach out to program staff, alumni, or other resources to brainstorm how they might mitigate similar challenges during the program. These stories can also be a powerful tool to foster empathy from other students in the group to understand better the importance of supporting their peers.

### *7.2 Identifying support networks*

The second goal in working with underrepresented students involves strategies for identifying or creating networks to lean on for support while overseas. These networks can provide comfort and familiarity when students feel overwhelmed with the strangeness of a new environment and can be a sounding board to reflect on new experiences and cope with challenges. Such advice can be beneficial for all study abroad participants, but many of the resources in the field developed for underrepresented students emphasize the importance of being able to reach out to a support network (Diversity Abroad 2018, 13).

In response to the need to reach out and connect with others, the CLS Program developed an innovative resource for incoming students in 2015 to connect them directly with alumni. The CLS Alumni Support Network features alumni who have volunteered to speak with incoming students about a variety of topics, either through direct outreach or through a formal mentoring program organized by program staff.

Those who volunteer to participate in the Alumni Support Network provide a photo, information about their CLS program year and location, their current job, and topics they are interested in talking about with incoming students. Program staff compile this information into directories by region and issue them to students (CLS Alumni Support Directories 2021).<sup>5</sup>

The directories allow new CLS students to reach out directly to alumni to talk candidly about their questions and concerns and to begin building a connection to someone who may understand what the experience might be like before they begin their travel. Some topics may be relevant for a broad range of students, such as tips for language learning, budgeting, or places to explore, but many focus on race and ethnicity, being LGBTQ+ abroad, gender identity, being a religious minority abroad, being a first generation or community college student, traveling with a disability, or managing mental health and wellness abroad.

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<sup>5</sup> Over 700 alumni contributed profiles for the 2021 directories.

Incoming students can also elect to be paired one-on-one with an alumni mentor who agrees to speak with them individually before and during the program. The CLS Program also maintains language-specific Facebook pages for alumni and participants across the years. These networks provide an opportunity for informal conversations and can help put students in touch with one another in familiar, lower-stakes and less intimidating environments than reaching out via email to a former participant or to a staff member.

Outside of the structure of the CLS Program there are other support networks that students might draw on for support during their time on the program including family and friends, LGBTQ+ or Black student organizations, campus Offices of Disability Services or other resources on home campuses, as well as counseling services.

### ***7.3 Building relationships***

The third goal in working with students prior to the program start is to build relationships between staff and students and students and the community. The overarching reasons for building connections with staff members is so that students feel comfortable reaching out to someone in advance of the program to ask questions about what to expect or to make arrangements tailored to specific needs, or during the program to talk about uncomfortable or confusing encounters. These relationships are fostered through individual and group communication starting at the point of acceptance to the program and continuing through the pre-program orientation and arrival to and orientation in the host city.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that while pre-program orientations can contribute to a successful program experience for both partners overseas and U.S. students, there are limits to what pre-departure training can accomplish. While implementing partners learn more about the American experience by interacting with U.S. students, students also learn most about the host country while they are experiencing it. Our goal in working with host institutions and students is not to impose a specific set of opinions, values, or beliefs but rather to prepare all parties to consider each other's point of view and come to these interactions with some tools to learn from uncomfortable situations and move past them. For students, this means that even when they encounter attitudes or beliefs of the host community that they disagree with, they consider

what they can learn from the encounter, how they can gain experience in navigating unexpected experiences that may challenge their own perspectives or worldview, and how they can best represent themselves, their communities, and the diversity of the U.S.

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