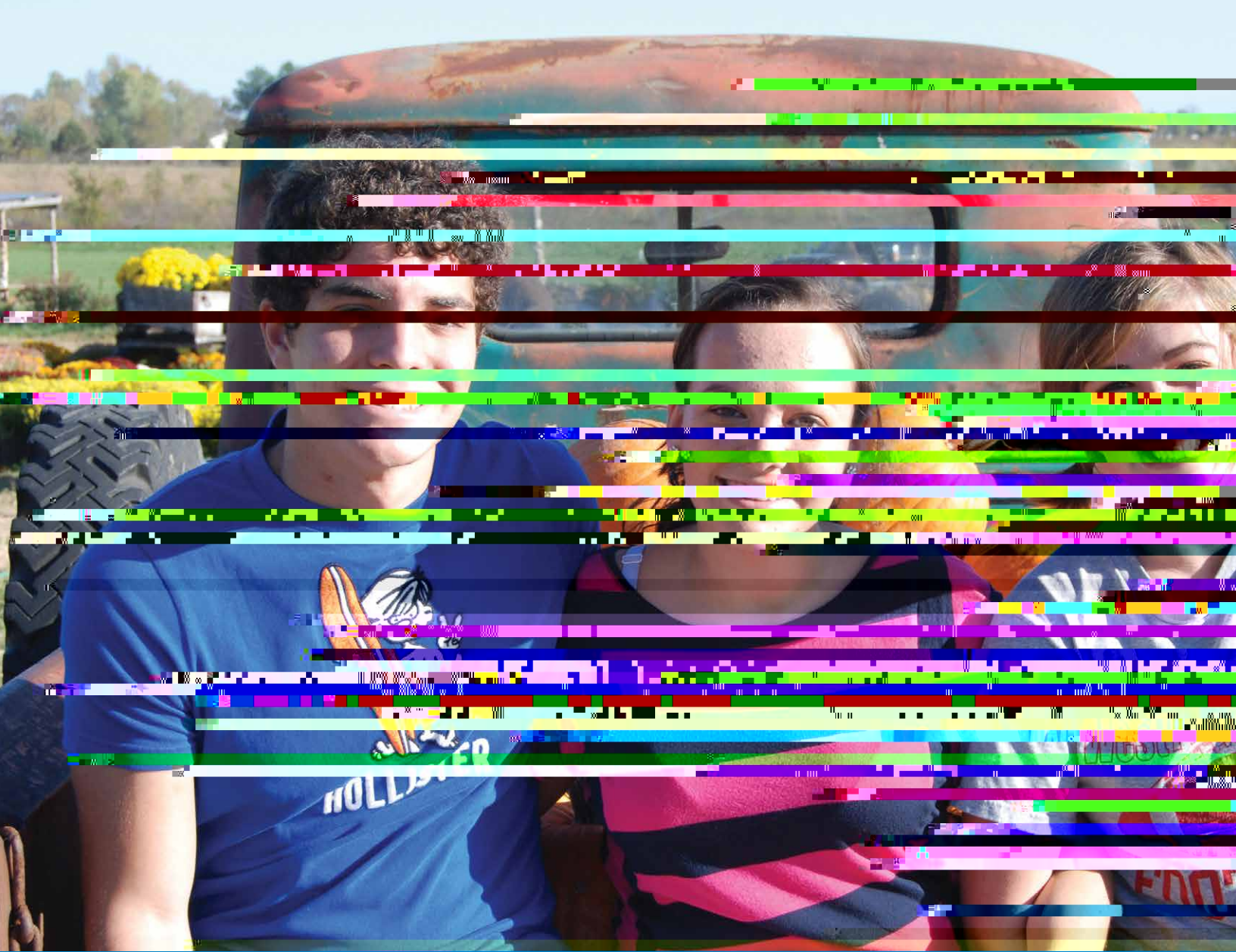




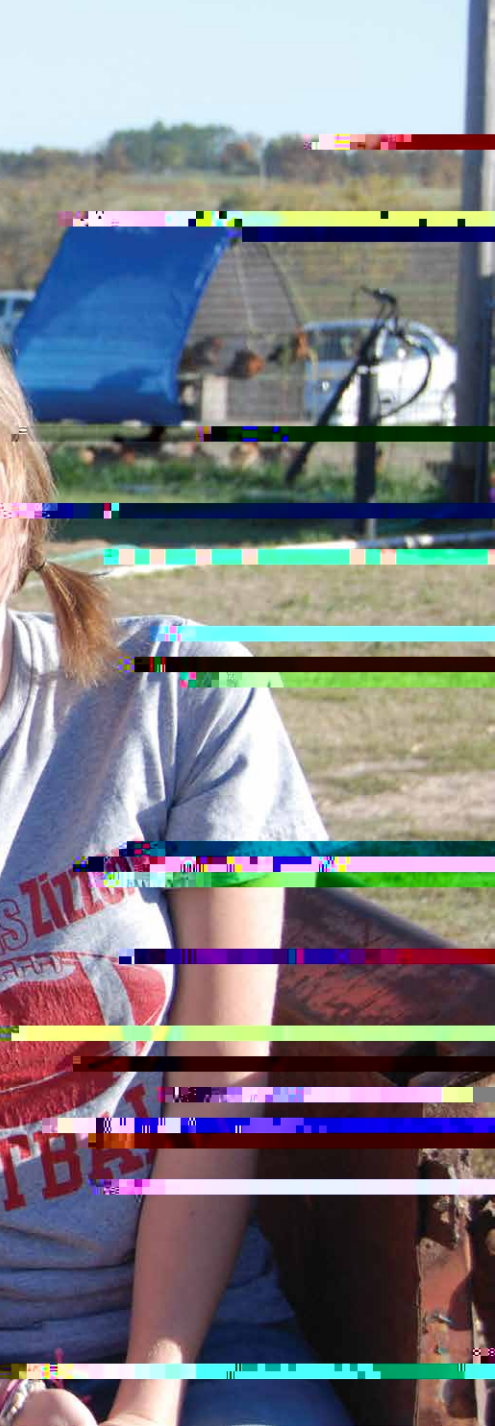
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*A View from our Alumni (2003-2012)*



## C

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## F

International education is a fundamental pillar of U.S. foreign policy and critical to advancing U.S. strategic interests. It has been that way since 1961 when the

As the AIFS Foundation nears its 50th anniversary in 2017, it decided to commission a program outcomes study of the AIFS Foundation's flagship program, Academic Year in America (AYA), to gather alumni reflections on how the program has influenced their lives. This report describes and analyzes how alumni regard the impact of their AYA program on their personal development and the lasting connections that continue to enrich their lives today. It seeks to verify the common understanding that youth exchange programs that include living with a volunteer host family and attending a U.S. high school for a semester or a year have a profound and lasting impact on their participants.

International student exchange programs emerged more than 70 years ago as a way to spread good will and peaceful relations, particularly following World War II. Programs enabled secondary school students from different nations to share their cultural heritage, language, and perspectives with one another. Some of the earliest established high school exchanges were bilateral programs between the U.S. and Germany, the U.S. and Japan, and France and Germany. Today, student exchange is a worldwide, multilateral phenomenon. Each year thousands of high school students participate in exchange programs, living and learning in countries all over the world, returning home with important new insights into themselves, their host  
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***International education contributes to stronger diplomatic and economic relations.***

Student exchange organizations are admired for the role they play in public diplomacy, also called “soft diplomacy,” and for their technical expertise in delivering international education to secondary students. Via public-private partnerships, their experience and know-how are accessed by government agencies interested in sponsoring



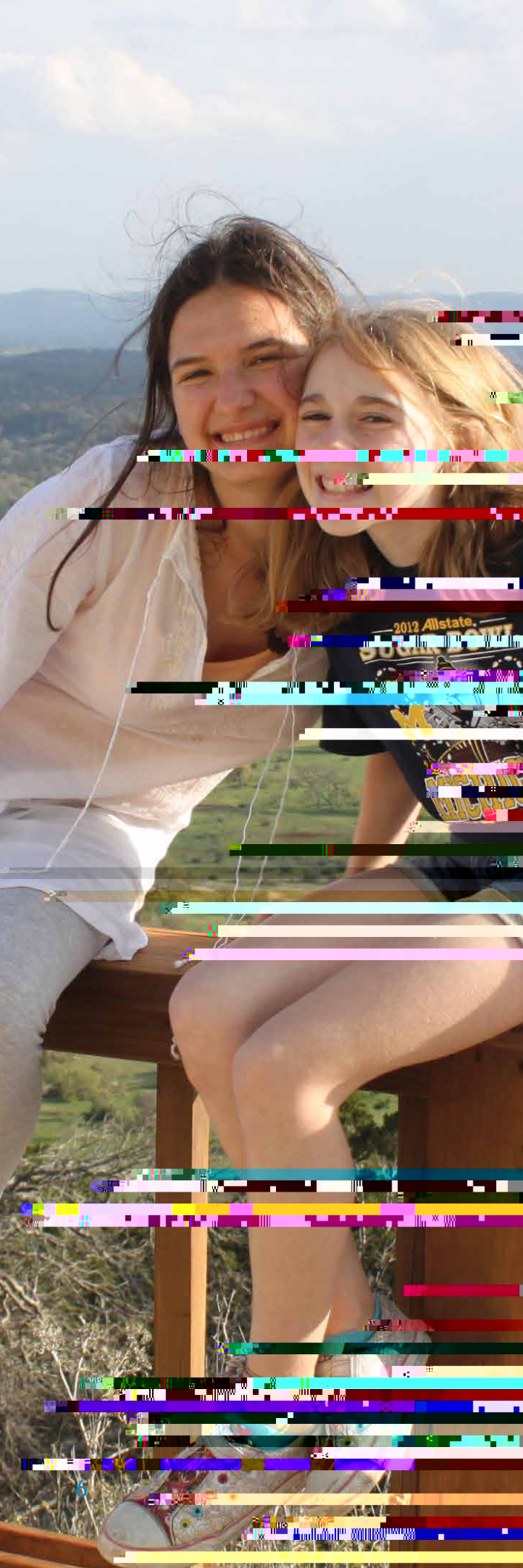


## E

In July 2013 a survey was sent electronically to 5,550 Academic Year in America (AYA) core program alumni and State Department funded grant program alumni in 20 different countries that included alumni from program years 2003-2012. The survey was designed to assess the impact of the AYA high school exchange program on students, families, and communities in the United States and at home and to evaluate how well the AYA program enriched personal growth and learning. In addition, it gathered data on the achievement of cross-cultural goals for students such as: learning about U.S. society and culture; sharing their own culture, traditions and views with Americans; developing a more nuanced understanding of the U.S. and of their own societies; strengthening leadership skills and community engagement; increasing their tolerance of and respect for differences; and establishing lasting bonds of friendship and mutual understanding. Based on the 839 completed surveys, which represent a 15 percent response rate, the program has had a significant impact on students in these areas. These results are comparable to those found in studies commissioned by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the FLEX and YES programs available here: <http://eca.state.gov/impact/evaluation-eca/evaluation-initiative/completed-evaluations>

This report describes and analyzes what alumni report regarding the impact of their AYA experience on their personal development, their growing understanding of the complexities of U.S. society, politics and culture, as well as that of their home countries, their choice of academic study and profession, and the lasting connections that continue to enrich not only their lives but also that of their families, friends and communities.

This report shares information about the AYA core program students, those students who come from the private sector to participate in the program. These observations have been compared to responses from 114 State Department funded grant program participants to show that the benefits of the program are similar for core program participants and grant program participants.



The major findings from the study clearly demonstrate the highly positive impact of the AYA program on the vast majority of its participants.

**Overall, AYA core students significantly:**

- Deepened their understanding of American people, values, and culture
- Shared new insights with their families, friends, and home communities
- Increased their appreciation for U.S. society and people
- Increased Americans' understanding about other countries
- Enhanced their potential to assume leadership roles and increased their engagement in extra-curricular activities at home
- Increased their English language fluency, among other new skills
- Achieved greater comfort with diverse cultures and people
- Increased their friendships with people from other cultures
- Enjoy greater and more lasting intercultural networks

The long-term effects of a high school homestay experience was validated in a study of German and American students<sup>2</sup> who participated in the Youth For Understanding (YFU) program in the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. The findings clearly support the premise that youth exchange experiences contribute to positive and long-lasting attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive changes in the majority of individual participants. Key findings include:

- An exchange experience enhances one's international perspective.
- The effects of the experience include greater tolerance for diversity and appreciation for other cultures, supporting prospects for international peace and cooperation.
- Former exchange students apply what they learn and influence others.

2. Bachner, D. & Zeuschel, U. (2009) Students of Four Decades: Participants' reflections on the meaning and impact of an international homestay experience. Münster: Waxmann.



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To put this study into context, this section describes the Academic Year in America (AYA) program, goals, and applicant requirements.

Since 1981, each year on average 800 students from more than 40 countries have experienced America as AYA students. Like the federally funded YES and FLEX programs (see Appendix), AYA brings international high school students to the U.S. to live with American host families for a semester or academic year while attending high school. While improving their English, these young people share a cross-cultural exchange with their host families, schools and communities.

Students take a variety of courses in language, history, geography, mathematics, literature, and science. Extracurricular activities are also considered core to the learning process, and students are encouraged to participate in these. AYA monitors school performance and quarterly grades, and students are subject to the same academic and social rules as any other student in school. To remain in good standing with the program, a student must enroll in an appropriate English language or literature course and an American Studies course, and maintain a C+ or better average in all classes.

To qualify for the AYA program, students must be 15-18 years of age, have studied English for at least three years, have solid academic records, demonstrate maturity and adaptability to a new cultural environment, as well as the motivation to succeed in a U.S. high school environment. AYA students arrive in August for the 10-month academic year or for the 5-month fall semester program; or in January for the 5-month spring semester program. Grant funded students are required to have similar qualifications and, in addition, often come from underprivileged communities in their countries.

### The goals of the AYA program are to:

Assist in the development of English language skills and academic achievement.

AYA students come from more than 35 countries, including:



*A person who is not afraid to be different is a person who is not afraid to be themselves. A person who is not afraid to be different is a person who is not afraid to be themselves. A person who is not afraid to be different is a person who is not afraid to be themselves. A person who is not afraid to be different is a person who is not afraid to be themselves.*

*Lisa-Marie Schmidt, 18, Germany*

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D



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*B*rasil is a beautiful country with a rich culture and history. I have been lucky to experience it all during my stay in Brazil. The people are very friendly and welcoming, and the food is delicious. I have learned a lot about the country and its people, and I am grateful for the experience.

*Eduardo Henrique Azevedo, 18, Brazil*

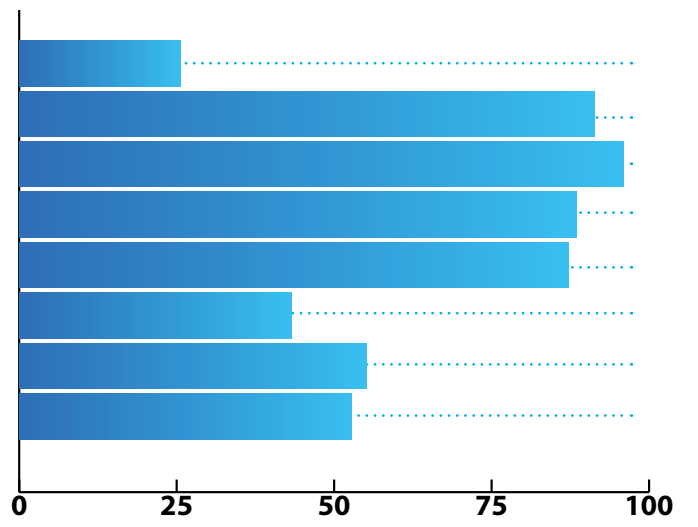
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*I have been living in the United States for a few years now, and I have learned a lot about the country and its people. The people are very friendly and welcoming, and the food is delicious. I have learned a lot about the country and its people, and I am grateful for the experience.*

*Marisa Timm, 20, Germany*

One of the goals of the AYA program is that international youths not only develop a greater sensitivity to and appreciation for American life, but they also stimulate Americans' interest in other cultures and languages.

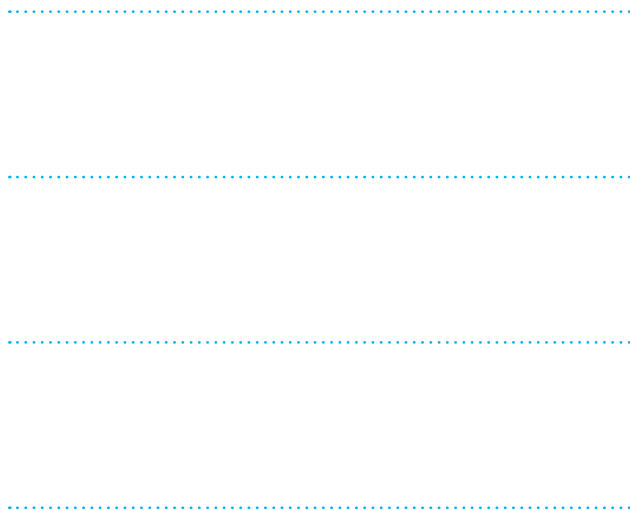
The survey data indicates that the vast majority of AYA students share their customs and cultures with their American host families and new American friends. In return, they gain a special understanding of America, its social and cultural diversity, the English language, and many other skills and insights which they bring home to their families, friends and communities.



## *Bringing the U.S. Home*

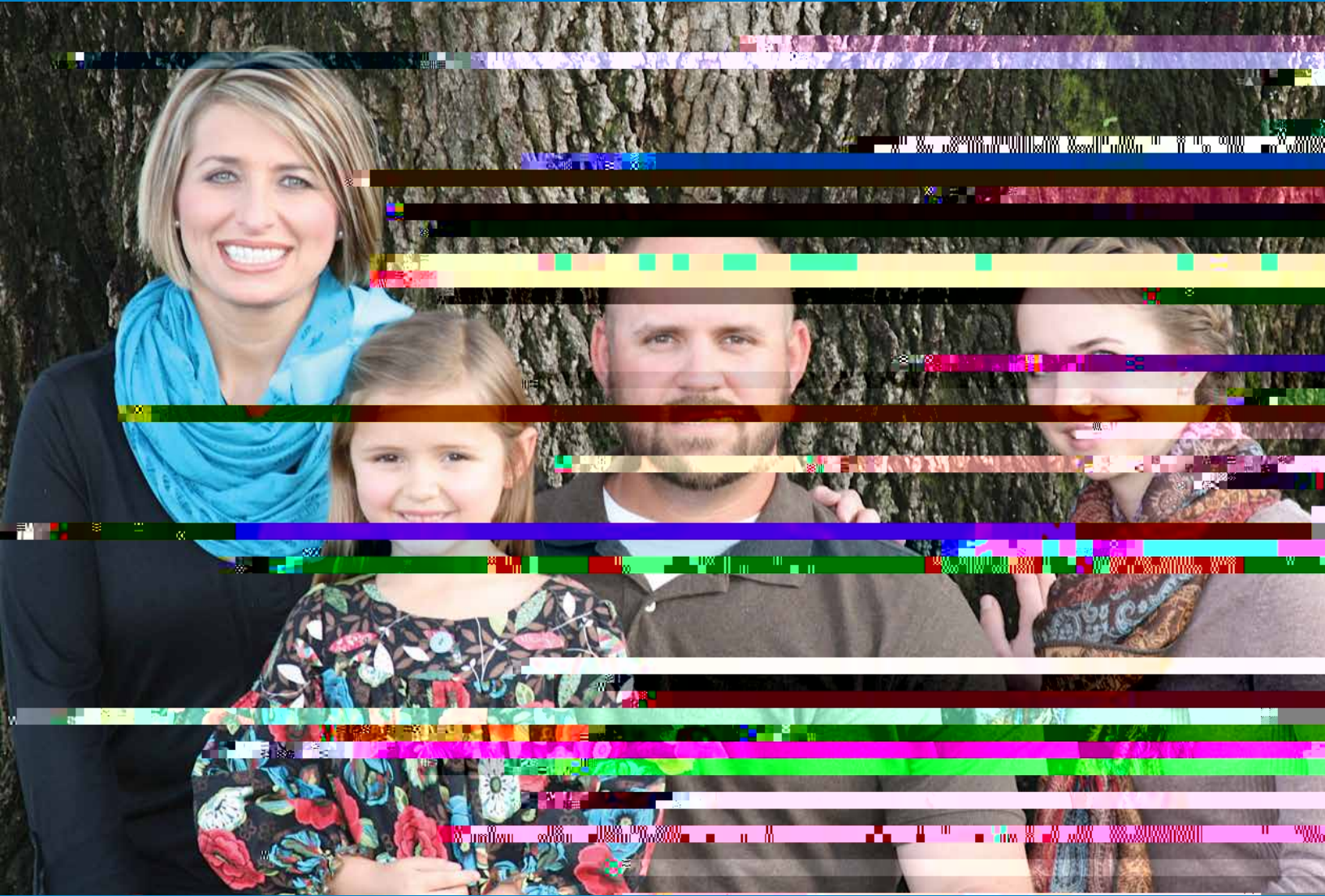
The knowledge and insights a student gains upon completing their study abroad program are vast and worth sharing with their friends, family and home community. And share they do – 98 percent of core students said they have shared their new understanding of the U.S. and its people with friends, family, and community back home. The majority of both core and grant students said they had more than 10 discussions with family and friends, hundreds of respondents reported giving at least one presentation at school, and many others gave presentations at community events and/or gave at least one media interview.

While it might be expected that a study abroad program would deepen a student's understanding of their host country, the majority of both grant and core students (more than 72 percent) find the experience has a profound effect on their perception of home. The exchange experience provided them with deeper insights into their



98%

of core students said they have shared their new understanding of the U.S. and its people with friends, family, and community back home.



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*My family and I have been able to share our experiences with the U.S. and its people with friends, family, and community back home.*

*Andrea Gonzalez Aleman, 20, Mexico*

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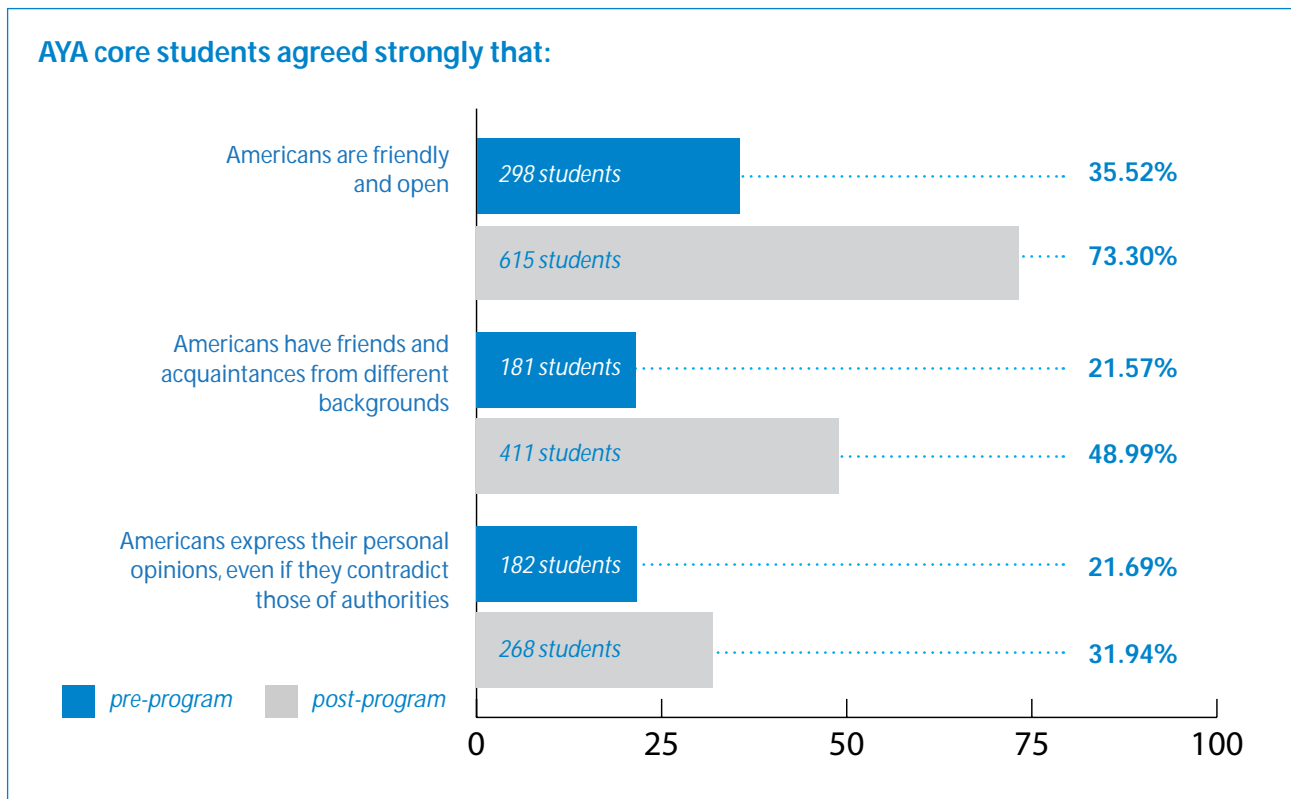
Many students were surprised to find how much they enjoyed living in the U.S. and getting to know Americans. Some said they now realize that fully immersing themselves in another country's culture was the only way to truly learn about it – and the experience yielded positive results.

Upon completing the program and a year after returning home, a large majority of both grant and core participants (more than 78

percent) had a “more favorable” view of Americans as a result of their AYA experience.

The graph below reflects how core students' perceptions of Americans changed on specific topics after their study abroad program.

## Changing perceptions of Americans

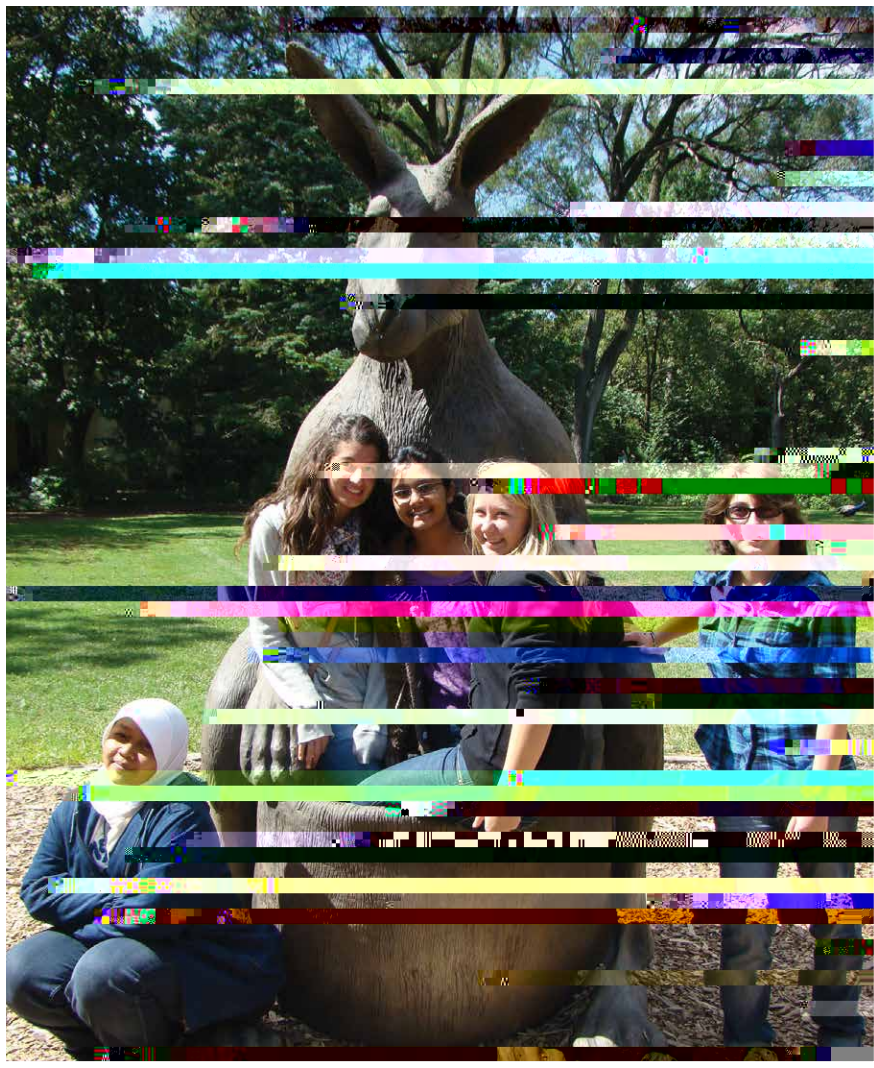


These figures saw similar trends among grant program participants, with strong majorities agreeing that Americans are friendly and open, have friends from different backgrounds, believe they can make a difference in their society, and express their opinions. Each opinion saw a marked increase post experience.

A study abroad experience affects many more than just the student who lives it. They have the opportunity to bring home new insights, opinions, and perceptions to their friends and family in their home country. Students reported these new ideas encouraged a more positive outlook on the U.S.

In addition, participants have used their improved communication skills to inform friends, family, and community members about the United States and its people. The great majority of respondents believed these efforts have been successful, in that the people around them now have more positive and nuanced views of the United States and of Americans.





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„Ich finde es sehr schön, dass wir alle hier zusammen sind und  
uns gegenseitig unterstützen können.“

*Regina Kathriner, 20, Switzerland*

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„Ich finde es sehr schön, dass wir alle hier zusammen sind und  
uns gegenseitig unterstützen können.“

*Agata Nowakowska, 20, Poland*

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Some of the most impactful effects of the study abroad experience are intangible, but that does not make them any less valuable. Almost every core student surveyed (more than 91 percent) said self-growth was what they liked best about their study abroad experience. Students commented they learned to be self-reliant, to become more organized, and gained in self-confidence. They learned to get along with and work with people different from themselves, to affirm their own identity while also appreciating team spirit.



*...the most impactful effects of the study abroad experience are intangible, but that does not make them any less valuable. Almost every core student surveyed (more than 91 percent) said self-growth was what they liked best about their study abroad experience. Students commented they learned to be self-reliant, to become more organized, and gained in self-confidence. They learned to get along with and work with people different from themselves, to affirm their own identity while also appreciating team spirit.*

*Devlin Biezus, 19, Brazil*



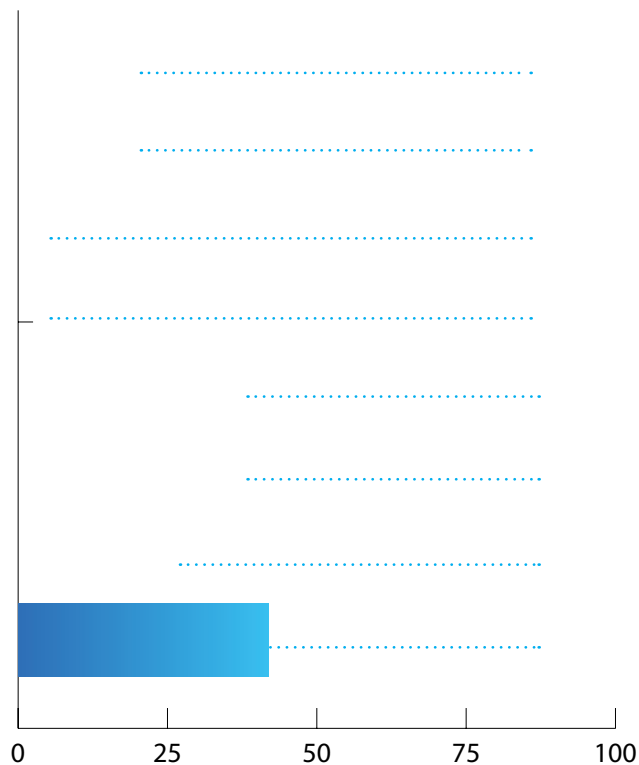
*...the most impactful effects of the study abroad experience are intangible, but that does not make them any less valuable. Almost every core student surveyed (more than 91 percent) said self-growth was what they liked best about their study abroad experience. Students commented they learned to be self-reliant, to become more organized, and gained in self-confidence. They learned to get along with and work with people different from themselves, to affirm their own identity while also appreciating team spirit.*

*Greta-Christiana Zoehner, 17, Germany*



# Leadership

## Abilities strengthened during experience as an exchange student



Significantly, 79 percent of core alumni surveyed state that the experience as an exchange student increased their interest in taking a leadership role in school or community activities, with 26 percent currently in leadership roles and 49 percent active in planning activities, events and projects. A majority of both grant and core program participants reported their experience influenced their leadership abilities and extracurricular activities.

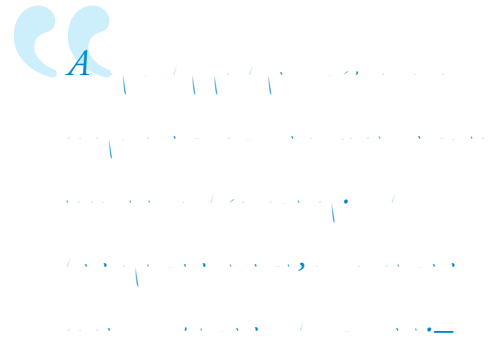
Working well with others is a key to effective leadership. Core students also gained these skills during their abroad experience. About 76 percent said they improved their ability to lead a team by taking charge (explaining tasks and motivating others). Even more reported increased tolerance and flexibility, as well as the ability to listen to others and express their own ideas.

Across the board, a majority of both grant and core program participants reported increases in every skill about which they were surveyed, including leadership skills.

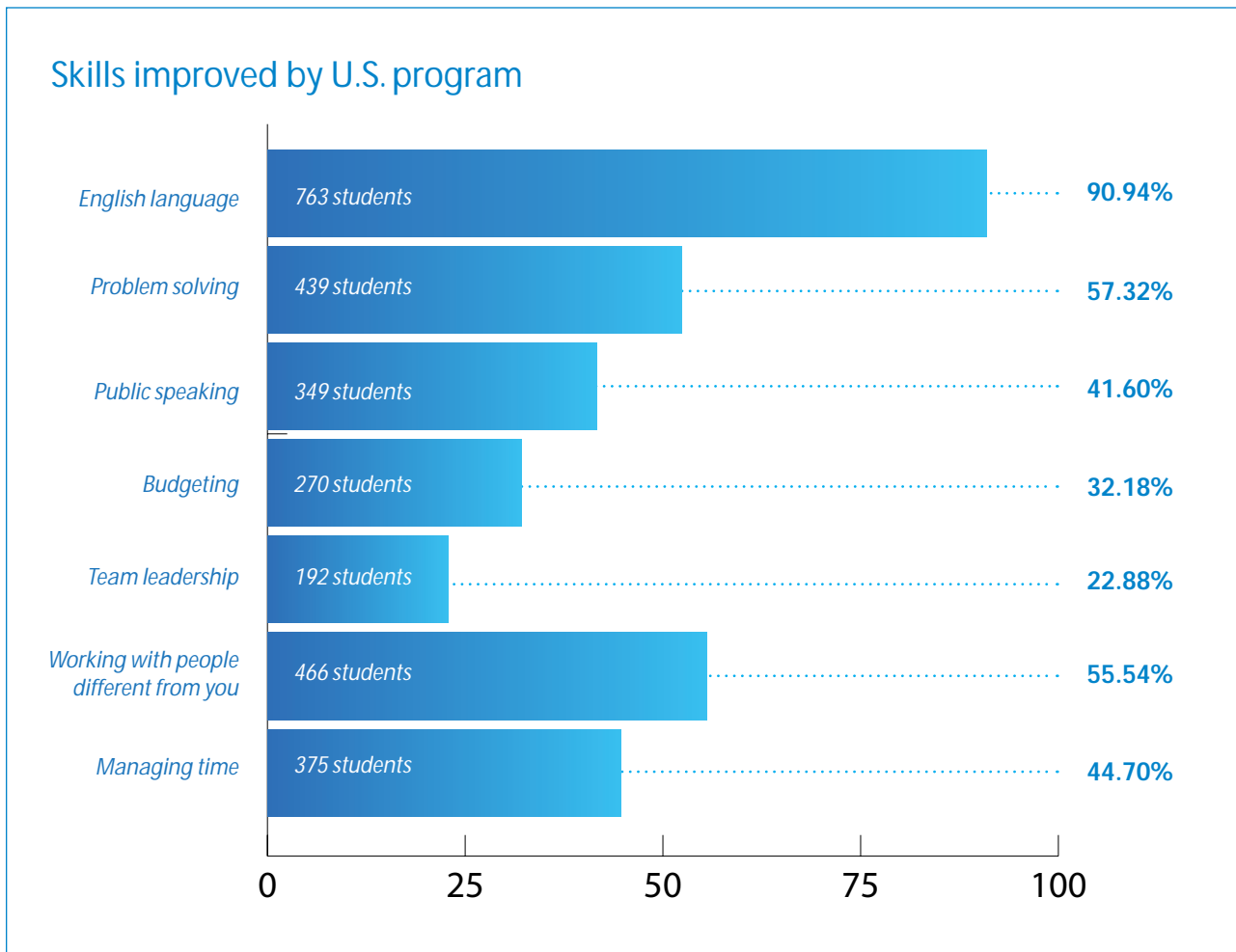
## Skills

Students reported gains and improvements of many important skills. Nearly all core students (99 percent) said they improved their English language skills. More than 94 percent of students saw improved problem solving skills and an increased ability to work closely with others who are different.

The majority of both grant and core students appreciate these improved skills: About 84 percent of core participants said improving their skills and knowledge was what they liked best about their U.S. program.



Anja Borejdo, 21, Germany



Lea Gueron, 18, Germany

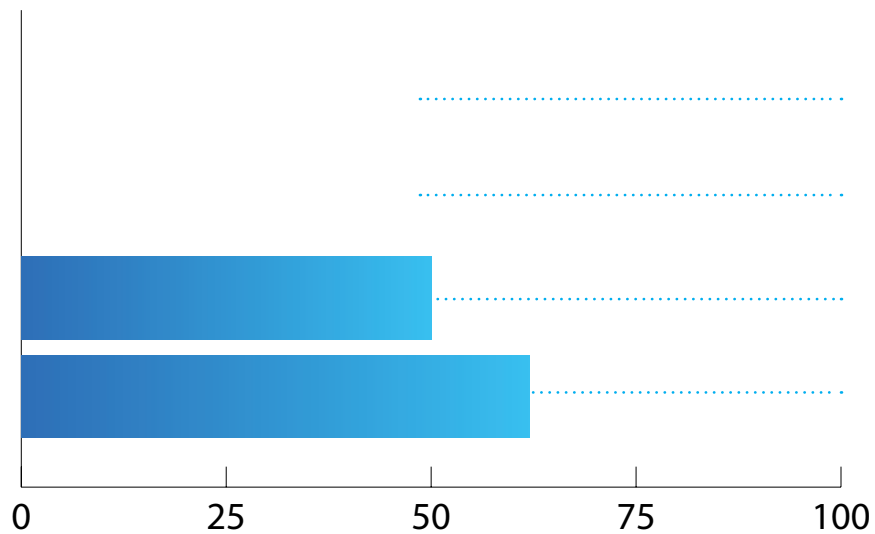


C

Making strong, lasting personal ties is invaluable to a young person's development,

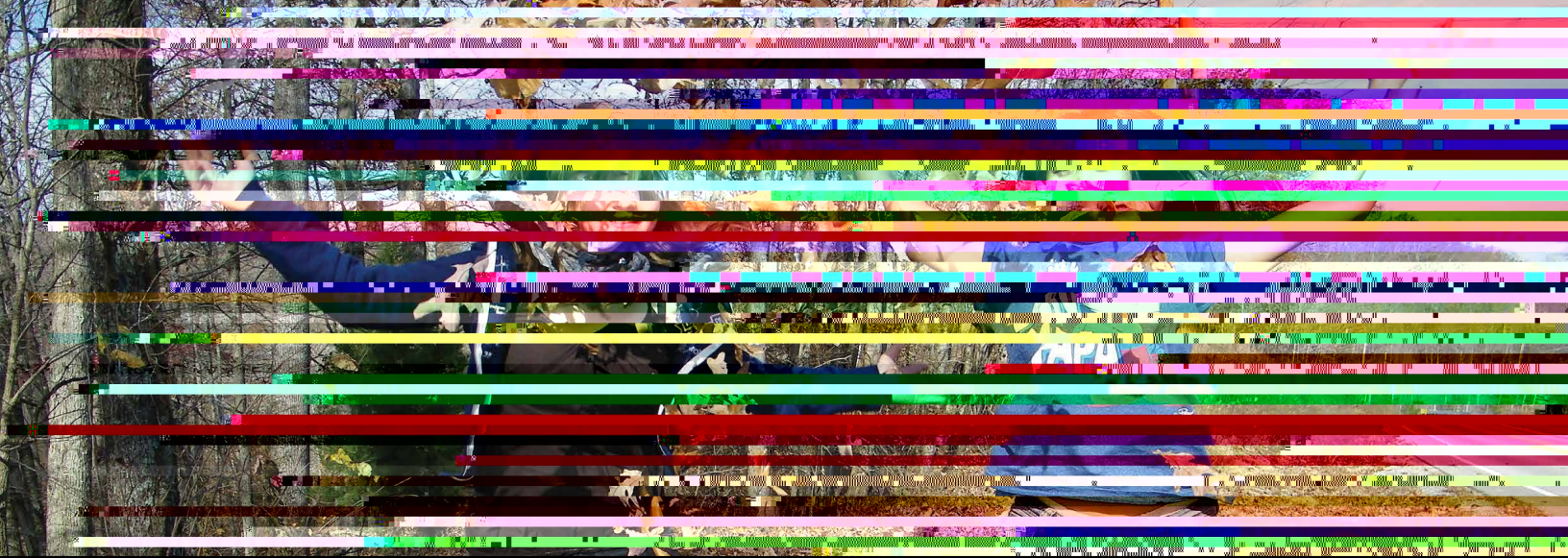
## Staying in Touch

AYA core students have stayed in contact with...



Many students were impacted so significantly by their exchange program that they went beyond simply keeping in touch and have already returned to the United States to study, work or – mostly – for pleasure. A remarkable 60 percent of core alumni report that they have returned to the United States since their program experience to visit their host families or

friends (47 percent), study (10 percent) or work (three percent). The continued frequency of communication with friends and host families in the United States may indicate that visits will continue in the future because many alumni who responded to the survey were still in secondary school or university students.



## *Importance of Friendship*

Hosting a student often forms deep international bonds between the host family and the young traveler and a strong desire to see each other again. Forty percent of students reported someone they met while in the U.S. has visited them in their home countries. Such a substantial figure is a testament to the lasting connections formed during these programs.

Almost all (97 percent) of the core students surveyed said the friendships they developed with Americans was somewhat important or very important to their total experience in the U.S., with the majority (77 percent) pointing toward “Very important.”



*Ninghua Ding, 20, China*











The findings of this impact study indicate that the AYA core participants emerged from the program with an improved and more nuanced understanding of American society and culture, with greater tolerance for other peoples and cultures, and with improved leadership and communication skills. Specifically, the study demonstrates the success of the program in:

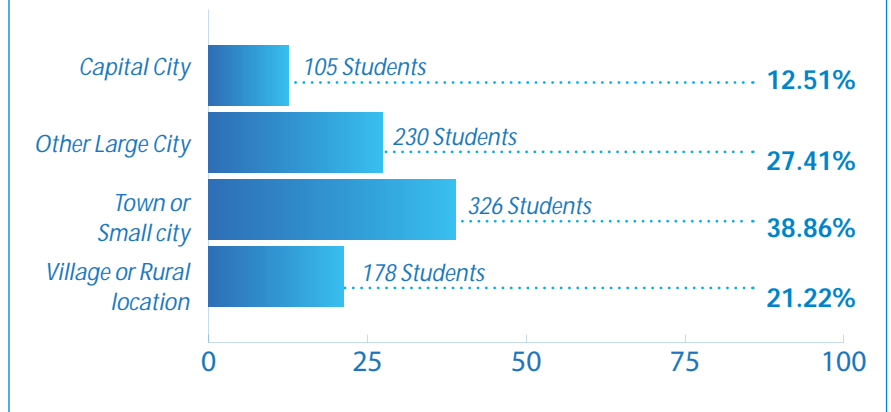
1. Increasing students' appreciation of the complexities of American society, as well as their own
2. Strengthening students' confidence, tolerance and awareness, as well as communication and leadership skills
3. Promoting greater involvement in community and organizational activities
- 4.

# A

## I. Response Result – Demographics

- » Year in US, 2003 - 2012
- » Country of Origin
- » Size of hometown (See figure 1)
  - Capital city - 105 students
  - Other large city - 230 students
  - Town/small city - 326 students
  - Village/rural location - 178 students
- » Current Employment Status (See figure 2)
  - High school student - 358 students
  - College/university/technical student - 418 students
  - Working - 51 students
  - Unemployed - 11 students
- » Current Field of Work or Study (See figure 3)

Figure 1: Size of Hometown - Core Students



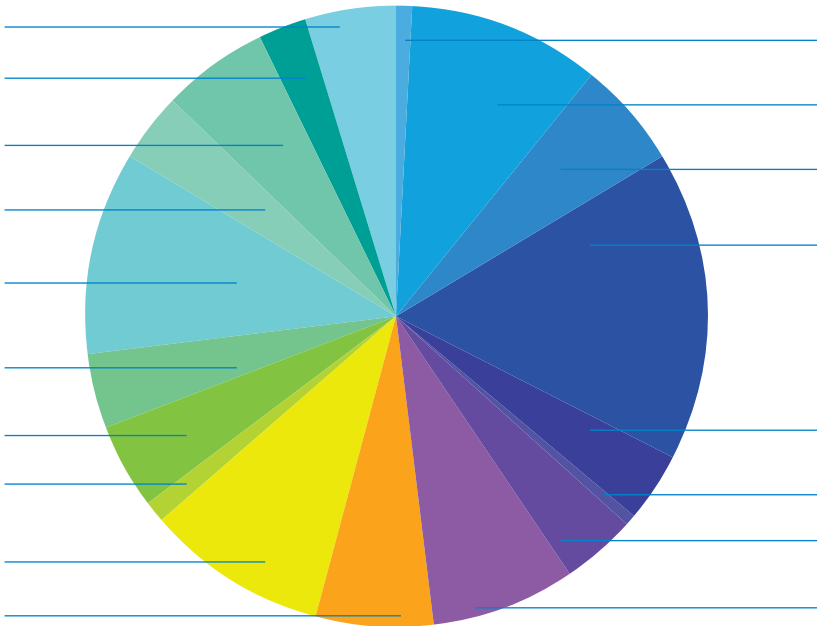
## II. Survey Background

On July 25, 2013, the survey was emailed to 5,550 alumni, which produced 953 responses within a 3-week period. Of the initial mailing, 116 of email addresses were invalid. A total of 3 reminder emails were sent between July 25- August 16, 2014. The mailing included a web link and unique code alumni could use to complete the survey. The 839 total core student responses reflect a 15.12% return rate.

The 8-page instrument contained questions to establish biographical data, including the size of student's home town, current activity (high school, college, working, unemployed), influence of program on academic and career choice, and current field of study or profession. The sections on impact posed questions in the areas of school or community engagement/leadership, personal development, cultural understanding, extent of sharing of cultural information while in the U.S. and in home country upon return, ongoing connections, and satisfaction with the exchange experience. There were two opportunities for open comments: "What was the ONE most important thing you learned about the United States while living there?" and the final question which invited any additional feedback regarding the AYA experience.

Survey design weaknesses: Nearly 43 percent of core respondents are currently in high school and nearly 50 percent are currently in college. Therefore, while the AYA survey shows significant program impact, it is hard to gauge based on this study whether the impacts will last over time. However, other longitudinal studies have shown this to be the case – notably the AFS study and Youth for Understanding studies cited above. In addition, 74% (623 students) of respondents were from Germany, resulting in more data from this country of origin. Finally, program impact is self-reported by participants retrospectively, relying on respondent memory and his/her subjective assessment regarding the effects of their study abroad experiences. This is true of most international exchange program studies which also rely heavily on respondents' interpretation and recollection of their experiences abroad. In some cases, studies have included control groups for comparison; however, this study did not.

**Figure 3: Current Field of Work or Study**  
*(Includes Core*



### III. Institutional Background

#### About AIFS Foundation

# A

## Sandra Davis

Sandra Davis is an expert in international education programs, with 30 years of experience in program evaluation. She has served as Project Director and/or provided oversight to over 30 international educational exchange programs, bringing strength in both research methodology and content area expertise. Currently working as an independent consultant, Ms. Davis has held senior leadership positions at Meridian International Center and the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and received awards for leadership, innovation, and technical excellence, as well as appointments to various boards, including the Alliance for International Educational Exchange. Ms. Davis has an MA in International Affairs from the George Washington University Elliott School in Washington, D.C. and BA from Stetson University, DeLand, FL.

## Catherine MacDonald

Catherine MacDonald is an award winning writer and communications professional with expertise in research, data collection, analysis and writing. Her experience in publications includes work that ranges from serving as an editor at a monthly glossy

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