



An Evaluation of the Community Connections Program

Executive Report

May 2004

I can say that my life is now divided into 2 parts – “before the trip to America” and “after the trip.” [Community Connections] influenced the development of my company,...my self-esteem, self-perception, and my relations with other people. (Moscow, Russia)

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

In July 2002, the U.S. Department of State’s Office of Policy and Evaluation in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) selected Lehmann Surveys & Research to conduct an evaluation of the Community Connections program. Community Connections, funded by the FREEDOM Support Act and administered by the Office of Citizen Exchanges in ECA, is a three-to-five week U.S. exchange program for entrepreneurs, local government officials, legal professionals, non-governmental organization leaders and other professionals from Eurasia.

The broad goals of the program are to contribute to economic and democratic reform in the independent states of the former Soviet Union and to promote mutual understanding. During their stay in the United States, participants receive practical hands-on training in their selected subject areas and live with American host families.

Community Connections began in Russia in 1994 under the name Business for Russia. Because of its success, the program was re-named and expanded to other countries: Moldova and Ukraine in 1996, Armenia, Belarus, and Georgia in 1997, Kazakhstan in 1999, Azerbaijan in 2001, and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2002. Since 1994, Community Connections has supported more than 13,000 participants.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Alumni overwhelmingly support Community Connections. Virtually all of them (99%) say that the program was useful to them. Focus group transcripts abound with testimonials and examples of how Community Connections changed the lives of participants. Eighty-six percent of alumni had never traveled to the United States prior to this program. The data clearly show that participants think they gained knowledge about political, social, and economic institutions in the United States. Alumni report learning new skills and strategies, which have helped them to grow professionally.

Alumni impact on their home communities is dynamic and extremely positive. Extrapolating from survey responses, we estimate that more than 400 *thousand* members of the participants’ home communities benefited indirectly from Community Connections. Funding one participant benefits that person *and* 36 other members of his/her home community.

Chart 1: Estimate of the Total Diffusion Effect of Community Connections

Total Community Connections Alumni as of December 2003	Who Indirectly Benefited	Mean # of Beneficiaries per Alumna/us	Total # of People Indirectly Benefiting from the C.C. Program
11,541	Co-Workers	9.4 people	108,485
	Superiors	5.8 people	66,938
	Colleagues from other organizations	7.6 people	87,712
	Government officials	4.1 people	47,318
	Young people	9.3 people	107,331
	People – all types	36.2 people	417,784

Judging by focus group discussions, Community Connections alumni also enhanced the social and professional lives of their American host communities.

Community Connections alumni view the selection process as fair and open and the program as well-managed. Two-thirds attend at least some alumni activities. Even those who are not interested in group activities take advantage of professional and personal linkages which arose out of the program. The only criticism that emerges is that Americans tend to underestimate the knowledge and training of participants. Alumni ask that the internships and alumni activities become more demanding and sophisticated, to reflect the evolution of their home countries 13 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Community Connections is an extremely important program because it targets dynamic professionals who can articulate their professional needs, who return home, stay home, and have a large impact on their local communities. Given the number of people who benefit indirectly from Community Connections, both here and abroad, this is an extremely cost-effective professional development program. Lehmann Surveys & Research strongly supports continued funding of this program.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The program is administered by the Office of Citizen Exchanges, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, in the U.S. Department of State. Participants for the Community Connections program are selected through open competition. American non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations with offices in a participating country work with U.S. Embassy staff on recruitment. All participants must complete written applications. Reading committees select the strongest pool of candidates. These candidates are then invited to an in-person interview conducted by a selection committee. Business candidates are also screened for their English language ability, while participants in professional programs are not required to speak English.

Themes for professional groups are identified on a yearly basis after collaboration between the staff of the Office of Citizen Exchanges and the local U.S. Embassy. Professional programs focus on issues of importance to professionals from the legal, governmental, agricultural, small business development, educational, health care, non-governmental organization, media and environmental fields, among others.

Programs for English-speaking business participants are designed as individual internship experiences. They may include seminars, consultancies and site visits. Programs for professionals who do not speak English are less individualized, more group focused and use a variety of training methodologies. All professional programs are implemented with the assistance of U.S.-based locally hired interpreters.

Once finalists are chosen, the staff of the Office of Citizen Exchanges assign groups of participants to the most appropriate U.S. community host organization based on available industry or professional resources and/or sister city links. Community host organizations are selected through open competition. Winning host organizations must demonstrate extensive experience in coordinating international exchange programs and show strong support from leaders and institutions in their home communities. The U.S. hosting organizations work closely with local businesses and public and private organizations, which volunteer their time and resources to develop and implement programs for Community Connections participants. Companies offering internships range from small, family-run enterprises to major, multi-national "Fortune 500" corporations. Community Connections hosting organizations have included International Visitors Councils, World Affairs Councils, community colleges, Rotary clubs, Sister City associations, and universities.

Program recruitment organizations and host organizations are jointly responsible for the overall planning and implementation of the program, including arranging for all international and domestic travel, internship planning and placement, local transportation, finding host families, cultural programming, hiring of interpreters for non-English speakers, and the organization of seminars.

Homestays are another important aspect of the Community Connections program. Participants live with local U.S. families who provide the participant with an intimate look at American society. In many cases, host families and participants become close friends and maintain contact and visit each other once the program is over. Like host companies and other organizations, host families volunteer to share their lives with these international guests, providing direct exposure to U.S. culture and life.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This evaluation covers alumni from 1994 through the first half of 2002. Only alumni from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan were contacted for this evaluation. Both surveys and focus groups were used to gather data.

Dr. Lehmann worked closely with ECA and long-time colleagues at the Russian Academy of Sciences and Moscow State University to design, translate, revise, and conduct the survey and focus group interviews. The survey consisted of a main module, which was asked of all alumni, and six topic modules, only one of which was asked of each alumna/us. The topic modules were designed to reflect the themes covered by the different professional groups who travel under the Community Connections program.

Lehmann Surveys & Research’s own international team consisting of over 200 local colleagues with survey research experience conducted the in-depth face-to-face survey interviews between January and May 2003. Alumni in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazakhstan could choose to be interviewed in either the official language of their country or Russian. **The hour-long survey had a 73.3% response rate; this report reflects the opinions of 5,429 Community Connections alumni.**

Approximately 128 people were re-interviewed in May and June of 2003 in a series of 16 follow-up focus group discussions held in 11 cities: Ekaterinburg, Khabarovsk, Moscow, Samara, and Vologda in Russia; Kharkiv, Lviv, Odessa, and Poltava in Ukraine; Tbilisi in Georgia; and Alma Ata in Kazakhstan. The focus group sessions proved particularly useful for eliciting examples of anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of the program. Alumni were extremely articulate when it came to offering strategies for improvement.

PROGRAM FINDINGS

Survey results demonstrate that Community Connections is meeting its first goal of exposing participants to the institutions and challenges of a democratic, free-market society. As a result of their exposure to American society, the majority of alumni improved their assessment of American political, economic, and social institutions.

Chart 2: Changing Assessment of U.S. Political and Economic Institutions

	Rule of Law	Freedom of Speech	Democracy	Market Economy
Greatly Improved	26%	22%	26%	34%
Slightly Improved	20%	21%	22%	28%
No Change	36%	45%	41%	30%
Slightly Worsened	2%	4%	5%	2%
Greatly Worsened	0%	1%	1%	0%
Hard to Say	16%	7%	5%	6%

Chart 3: Changing Assessment of U.S. Social Institutions

	U.S. Ethnic/Cultural Diversity	Role of Religious Organizations	Role of Volunteer Organizations	Role of the Individual in Society
Greatly Improved	37%	25%	41%	26%
Slightly Improved	28%	24%	24%	25%
No Change	24%	34%	21%	26%
Slightly Worsened	5%	2%	1%	3%
Greatly Worsened	1%	1%	0%	1%
Hard to Say	6%	15%	12%	20%

Many aspects of American society were viewed with positive amazement:

I visited private and state schools. That was an unforgettable experience for me because their curricula differ greatly from ours....Private college [in the U.S.] is a business, it is an educational business. (Director of Lingua Language School, Kazakhstan)

[Americans] have a different system – case law....I am amazed with case law. Why? Because I think that the precedent system is like custom tailoring. [Ukrainians] have ready-made clothes, [Americans] have custom tailoring. (Kharkiv, Ukraine)

We were amazed at the high level of social support for citizens with low incomes. Our expectations regarding the discrimination of minorities turned out to be false. The excellent conditions that are created in the U.S. in order to make the disabled feel like valuable members of society are worth noting and studying. (Tbilisi, Georgia)

Community Connections alumni are extraordinarily committed to their professions. Over 90% of alumni state that they are willing to work harder than they have to, to help their firm or organization succeed. More than half said that they would turn down a much better paying job in order to stay with their current organization. Half of alumni report that the fiscal health of their firms has improved as a direct result of contacts or information gained on Community Connections. Among those not already heading firms at the time of the exchange, 62% of alumni report that their employment status has risen, 25% report that the scope or nature of their work has changed, and 24% report increasing the hours they work and hiring personnel.

The program has clearly met its goal of creating professional and personal partnerships. Almost half of alumni report that they made at least one subsequently useful contact with an American professional. Sixty-nine percent made a useful contact with a fellow participant that they met during the program. Thirty-two percent of alumni report beginning projects with Community Connections alumni, 15% with Americans. More than a third of alumni report winning new business with firms that they regularly work with *as a direct result of Community Connections*.

Below is a summary of how the Community Connections program is fulfilling each of its four major goals:

<p>Goal 1: Community Connections will expose participants to the institutions and challenges of a democratic, free market society.</p> <p><i>We attended a [Tucson City Council Session]. Any interested person could attend it. There were discussions of parking bans and expenses for fire prevention activities. Anyone could ask questions and make speeches – either supportive or disapproving. Then, members of the Council voted. I thought that was the way democracy should work. (Alma Ata, Kazakhstan)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The exchange clearly improved both the understanding and assessment of most U.S. political, social, and economic institutions. It also exposed participants to many subtleties of American life and values.• Participants were most impressed with American diligence, organization, initiative regardless of age, helpfulness, and patriotism. They were very impressed that the average citizen had great access to information, services, and the ability to have an impact on local government.• Participants were surprised to find American freedom to be highly regulated by a system of laws and customs, which people generally obey. They found that American individuality created more solitude than they found comfortable or admirable.• Alumni found that their preconceptions of the role of religion in American life were somewhat inaccurate. They were impressed with American volunteerism, some of which proved contagious. They had high praise for American social service institutions.
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Goal 2: Community Connections will inspire participants to implement change in their home countries.

We changed our attitude toward the disabled – not only from a medical point of view. We started to organize competitions for children. Then I won a small grant and organized fishing competitions for disabled children. Now we have karaoke contests. We see not only a psychological reaction, but eventually even their medical condition improves significantly. We didn't expect to achieve such results. They willingly come to visit us and want to enroll for treatment. (Physician, Vologda, Russia)

- Alumni have a profound, ongoing, and positive impact on their home communities via workshops, seminars, medical clinics, free legal services, new schools, new parent-teacher organizations, centers for public policy, and improved relations between all sectors of the economy and the local government. Alumni trace the origins of these contributions to skills or knowledge that they acquired while in the United States.
- Alumni in some cities have begun business greenhouses. *Self-employment*, launched by C.C. alumni, gives small credits to 100 people a year who want to start their own businesses. “Our second program – is a small center for business development where small spaces could be rented at very low prices; qualified lawyers and accountants can render assistance at quite reasonable fees.” (Cherepovets, Russia.)
- Some of the changes that alumni have implemented in their professional life include: recruiting promising candidates from local universities, using a probationary period for new employees, financing courses to raise the skill level of their employees, instituting yearly personnel reviews, and awarding bonuses for profitable ideas.

Goal 3: Community Connections will facilitate the building of public-private partnerships.

Combining in one group representatives from community organizations and head administrators – people who will probably determine the fate of these community organizations in the future – that was very sensible. (Vologda, Russia.)

Seventy-seven percent of alumni report contacting other alumni at least several times a year for professional reasons – a subgroup of 28% reported that the contact occurs several times a month. This contact leads to many examples of public-private partnerships.

- Alumni in Tbilisi, Georgia together with Americans they met, founded a Center for Public Policy to respond to the needs of local and national government policymakers.
- Ukrainian alumni report changing their professional attitude towards the Constitution. “Earlier it was seen as a declaration, today – as a legislative act that should be used in the work of an attorney.” (Poltava, Ukraine)
- Health care professionals in Vologda, Russia formed a regional organization of physicians, managers, and other medical personnel. Working together they report that they support each other and are more efficient at solving regional problems and working with health care authorities.
- In Ukraine, a city council deputy and a head of an information center met on exchange, returned home, and devised a computerized system for dispatching ambulances.
- Among those who were government officials, 33% definitely agree, and 27% somewhat agree that their Community Connections credentials helped them win their subsequent election.

Goal 4: Community Connections will create personal and professional linkages between the American host communities and the participants' home communities.

Upon our return home, seven of us decided to create a non-profit NGO in order to contribute to the further development of relations between Rustavi, Georgia and the State of Iowa. (Rustavi, Georgia)

- Almost 80% of alumni have gotten together socially since returning home. 30% of alumni report being in professional contact several times a year with alumni of other U.S.-funded exchange programs.
- Two-thirds of alumni have been in contact with their U.S. host families for personal reasons, more than one-third for professional reasons, since returning home.
- A fourth of alumni report contacting their U.S. host organization professionally several times a year.
- The most popular alumni activities are workshops and conferences. Alumni would like the level of the training to be somewhat more sophisticated, but even so, 86% of attendees report that events have been “useful.”
- Approximately one third of alumni never participate in sponsored alumni activities. Most of this non-participation is voluntary, due to lack of time, but some occurs when program management contracts change hands.

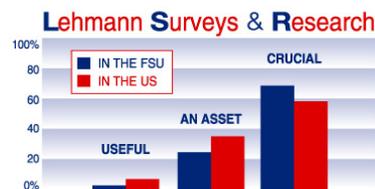
A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Alumni offered many thoughtful suggestions regarding the most fruitful composition of travel groups. They advised organizers to consider whether the participants in a given field can best be served by a local or national travel group, a group which is homogeneous or diverse with respect to profession, and homogeneous or diverse with respect to professional level of expertise or management level. Needs vary depending on the professional field and group theme. Alumni are unanimous that group composition plays a major role in participants’ abilities to implement change when they return home. Some pairings, such as NGO professionals and government officials, improve the likelihood that real change will be implemented at home.

The consensus was that the level of professional training needs to be raised somewhat. New professional developments, particularly those related to technology, need to be the focus of the internships, rather than a review of the basics. At the same time, alumni thought that the selection committee could raise its expectations that applicants be able to clearly state their goals for the program.

Prepared for:
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Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State

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