



Evaluation of the Youth Exchange and Study Program

Executive Summary

August 2009

Introduction

In June 2003, the Evaluation Division of the Office of Policy and Evaluation in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) in the U.S. Department of State engaged InterMedia Survey Institute to conduct an evaluation of the **Youth Exchange and Study Program**. YES, as the program is known, is an innovative, year-long high school student exchange program established in the aftermath of September 11, and sponsored by ECA. The evaluation, commissioned by the Evaluation Division, assessed the impact of the exchange experience on the YES students' attitudes and behavior over time. Its implementation also involved a unique collaboration between the Evaluation Division, InterMedia and the grantee exchange organizations. The final evaluation report documents the effectiveness of this ECA initiative in achieving its goal of building bridges of mutual understanding between Americans and people in countries with significant Muslim populations.

Program Description

The Youth Exchange and Study Program is an educational exchange program established in October 2002 by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The YES program provides scholarships for secondary school students (15-17) from countries with significant Muslim populations to spend up to one academic year in towns and cities throughout the United States. Students stay with American host families, attend high school, engage in activities to learn about American society and values, acquire leadership skills, and help educate Americans about their countries, cultures and customs. Since 2003, more than 3,480 students from more than two dozen countries have participated in the YES program.

The YES program aims to promote mutual understanding and respect between the people of the United States and the participating partner countries, with the following specific goals:

- *To provide the opportunity for young people in selected countries to learn more about American society, people, institutions, values and culture;*
- *To enhance American understanding of foreign students' countries and cultures;*
- *To provide the opportunity for young people in selected countries to learn more about civic rights and values and to view their own countries from a distance;*
- *To develop leadership skills while in the United States they can use when they return home;*
- *To support program participants in putting the knowledge and skills acquired during the exchange program to good use in their home countries; and*
- *To foster personal ties and institutional links.*

Study Description

InterMedia Survey Institute, a Washington D.C.-based research and evaluation organization, conducted a longitudinal evaluation study of YES participants from June 2003 through August 2009. The evaluation aimed to measure the program’s stated goals in terms of the following four outcomes:

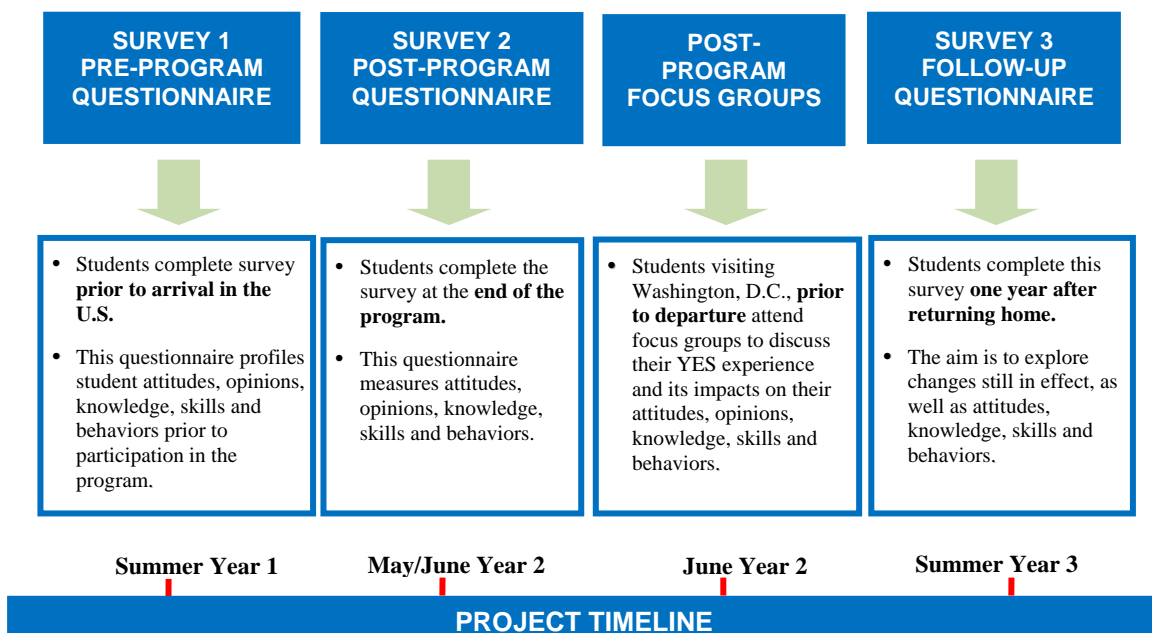
- *satisfaction with the exchange program*
- *learning and understanding*
- *behavioral changes*
- *personal linkages*

The evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how the YES students perceived themselves, their outlook and opinions, their attitude towards Americans and the United States, and the rights and responsibilities of individuals in society. For each annual cohort of students, data was collected at three different stages over an approximate two-year period:

- *At the beginning of the program and prior to arriving in the United States (Survey 1, using hard copy questionnaires)*
- *At the end of their one year of study in the United States, but before returning home (Survey 2, using an online questionnaire and several focus groups)*
- *One year after returning home (Survey 3, using hard copy and online questionnaires)*

The data collection timeline for each YES annual cohort was as follows:

Figure 1: Data Collection Timeline for Each Annual Cohort of YES Students (2003-8)



The response rates to each of the three surveys among the four YES student cohorts were as follows:

Table 1: Response Rates for the Three Surveys among YES Cohorts 1-4¹

Cohort #/years	Total # of Students at Start of Program	Respondents to Survey 1	Respondents to Survey 2	Respondents to Survey 3 ²
4 (2006-8)	642	642 (100%)	359 (56%)	316 (49%)
3 (2005-7)	619	592 (96%)	411 (66%)	344 (56%)
2 (2004-6)	434	360 (83%)	308 (71%)	192 (44%)
1 (2003-5)	161	161 (100%)	126 (78%)	118 (73%)
Total	1856	1755 (95%)	1205 (65%)	970 (52%)

The exchange organizations implementing the YES program were responsible for administering the hard-copy questionnaires for Survey 1 and contacting the students to complete the questionnaires for Surveys 2 and 3. The exchange organizations were grouped into three consortia headed by AFS-USA, American Councils and AYUSA International, along with IRIS and Nacel Open Door. (See Appendix II for a detailed list of the implementing exchange organizations.)

All data collection was done in English because participating students were proficient in English. Nevertheless, the language was reviewed for simplicity and lack of jargon to ensure high understanding.

The YES students came from more than 26 countries spanning South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. (See Appendix I for a breakdown of YES participants by country.) The YES students in Cohorts 1 to 4 were relatively evenly split between young men and young women; the majority were Muslims, from capital or large cities and from well-educated and well-to-do families. (See Section IX, Demographic Information, for a detailed profile of the YES students.)

This report presents the final findings for the evaluation of the first four cohorts of YES Program covering the period 2003 through 2009. The report aims to compare and contrast the results across the four cohorts, as well as to provide overall insights into the effectiveness of the program against its goals of increasing knowledge and understanding, developing leadership skills and fostering linkages as well as satisfaction with the program.³ It examines how participants' thinking has evolved over time, and how they have made use of the skills and knowledge they acquired while in the United States.

¹ Response rates differ because the exchange organizations had various levels of success in collecting the data from the participating students, the number of students and the start and end of the programs fluctuated somewhat, and because of the challenges of collecting data among young people who resumed their busy lives and/or relocated after the program. Numerous efforts were made to increase response rates (e.g., incentives, prolonged online survey period, repeated reminders, etc.).

³ The wording of questions in the pre-program survey (Survey 1) given to the first cohort was slightly different than that in subsequent surveys, due to a revision of the survey. In most cases, the wording was similar enough to allow for comparison across surveys and among cohorts. However, in a few cases, a question was changed so that the data were not directly comparable with the results of subsequent surveys. These differences are explained in footnotes throughout this report.

Overall Evaluation Findings: Achievement of Program Goals:

The evaluation of the impact of the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program on the first four cohorts of students indicates the success of the YES program in achieving its six main objectives. Overall, the program was an exceptionally positive experience for the vast majority of participants and the benefits of the experience remained in effect one year after the participants returned home. This factor alone highlights the overwhelming success of the YES program in achieving its objectives.

The findings highlight that the YES participants from all four cohorts and from 25 countries emerged from the program with:

- A deepened and more nuanced understanding of the United States, their own countries, as well as the roles and rights of individuals in society;
- Greater tolerance for other peoples and cultures;
- Much improved leadership and communication skills, and
- A sense of empowerment that they can affect change in their communities and beyond.

The potential longer-lasting impact of the YES program is illustrated by the finding that one year after their programs ended, the YES participants from cohorts one through four remain committed to becoming more involved in and working for change in their home communities, to influencing the views of those around them about American society, and to remaining in touch with their host families and friends.

For each annual cohort of students, data were collected at three different stages over an approximate two-year period:

- At the beginning of the program and prior to arriving in the United States (Survey 1)
- At the end of their one-year of study in the United States, but before returning home (Survey 2)
- One year after returning home (Survey 3)

Objective 1: To provide the opportunity for young people in selected countries to learn more about American society, people, values, culture and institutions.

- Nearly all of the YES students reported that their stay in the United States increased their understanding of U.S. politics, government and economy. Many were impressed with the functioning of democracy and the level of freedom and equality in the United States. At the same time, they gained an appreciation of the difficulties the country faces, yet admired the U.S. society's ability to discuss and work toward solutions of their problems.

- Upon completing the program and a year after returning home, a large majority of participants had a “more favorable” view of Americans as a result of their YES experience. The most important thing they felt they learned about Americans is that they are friendly, kind, helpful, open-minded and tolerant. Many commented on how friendly and welcoming Americans are to foreigners, such as YES students.
 - Living in the United States dispelled many of the negative stereotypes of Americans and U.S. society that participants had before their exchange experience. For example, many participants were surprised by the diversity of the American people, were impressed by how hard Americans work, and were taken aback by Americans’ limited knowledge of the world. In addition, the percentage of survey respondents believing that “most Americans are wealthy”—a preconceived notion often developed from watching television and movies—dropped substantially from the first survey to the third.
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Objective 2: To enhance Americans' understanding of foreign students' countries and cultures.

- Although the evaluation did not involve data collection among Americans in the YES students’ host communities, it is evident from participants’ responses that their frequent interactions, discussions and other modes of sharing information about their home countries and cultures left a lasting impact on their American counterparts. In addition, the frequent continued contact participants had with their host family and friends served to only continue to deepen Americans’ understanding of their exchange students’ societies.
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Objective 3: To provide the opportunity for young people in selected countries to learn more about civic rights and values and to look at their own countries objectively.

- Large majorities of the four YES cohorts entered the YES program with a strong belief in the rights of the individual in society, and their time in the United States only strengthened these beliefs. In particular, the percentage of survey respondents who considered the rights to adequate housing, to practice any religion, to travel freely and to access information “very important” increased substantially from Survey 1 to Survey 2, then increased even further in Survey 3.
- Similarly, although most Survey 1 respondents in all cohorts believed in equal opportunity for all prior to participating in the YES program, many were more inspired after witnessing how American society puts these beliefs into practice. In particular, the percentage of respondents who “strongly” believed that religious and ethnic minorities and people with disabilities should have equal opportunities increased substantially from the first survey to the third.
- Spending a year abroad caused the YES students to reflect on their own societies. YES participants emerged with a clearer vision of—and stronger views on—the positive and negative aspects of their own societies. The consistently reported having a greater sense of

pride in their countries and cultures, but also a greater awareness of their societies' shortcomings—such as underdevelopment and lack of community service—as well as a determination to change them for the better.

Objective 4: To develop leadership skills while in the United States they can use when they return home.

- Throughout their year in the United States, YES participants acquired new skills and knowledge that they have been able to apply in their home countries. Given that nearly all of the YES students arrived with relatively high levels of skills and knowledge for their age, these gains were all the more impressive. In particular, participants cited their communication and leadership skills among the most important of those they acquired during the YES program.
 - YES participants across all cohorts reported increased self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. In fact, nearly all survey respondents in every cohort reported an increase in their self-confidence during their year in the United States (in Survey 2) and further increases in self-confidence in their first year back home (Survey 3). Once back home, the majority of participants in Survey 3 strongly believed they can influence others and affect change in their communities, even more than in Survey 2.
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Objective 5: To support program participants in putting the knowledge and skills acquired during the exchange program to good use in their home countries.

- YES participants in all cohorts returned home eager to put their skills to good use by improving their communities and societies, and a large majority (approximately 80 percent) followed through by performing community service in their home countries. For example, many participants turned their strengthened belief in the rights of people with disabilities into action by volunteering with disabled people in their home communities. Others have used their new leadership and money management skills to help organize events and raise funds for good causes.
- Although many of the students reported playing leadership roles in organized clubs or activities before entering the YES program, they said they were even more likely to help plan activities, lead events or train others after completing the program. As an example, a full third of Cohort 4 participants doing volunteer work at home have taken the initiative to “create a community service event” in the past year, even more than did so in previous cohorts.
- In addition, participants have used their improved communication skills to inform friends, family and community members about the United States and its people in an effort to break down negative stereotypes. The great majority of Survey 3 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.

Objective 6: To foster personal ties and institutional links.

- Most of Survey 3 respondents reported participating in organized YES alumni activities as a way of maintaining contacts and links with fellow participants and working together to act upon common values they developed during the program. Not only did they enjoy attending social gatherings, workshops and lectures, but many participants also have collaborated on community service projects and have participated in recruiting future YES participants.
- A majority of Survey 3 respondents stayed in touch with their host families and American friends in the year after their exchange experience, as well as kept up with their teachers, fellow YES students and other foreign students they met in the United States. Furthermore, approximately one-third of respondents have had someone from their YES experience—host families, American friends, YES participants or other people they met—visit them since the end of the program.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the first four cohorts of the YES program clearly demonstrates the success of the program in meeting its objectives in terms of 1) increasing learning and understanding about the United States; 2) strengthening leadership skills; 3) promoting greater involvement in community and organizational activities, and 4) fostering long-lasting memories and ties between the students and those they met during their exchange experience. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed us to witness and record how YES participants have developed and grown as individuals, as well as how their views on and understanding of the United States have evolved.

The findings highlight that the YES 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, with much improved leadership and communication skills, and with a sense of empowerment that they can affect change in their communities and beyond. The potential longer-lasting impact of the YES program is illustrated by the finding that one year after their programs ended, YES participants from Cohorts 1 through 4 remain committed to becoming more involved in and working for change in their home communities, to changing the views of those around them about the United States, and to remaining in touch with their host families and friends.

In sum, the evaluation showed that from their pre-program orientation through their exchange year in the United States through their engagement in alumni activities, the YES students exhibited considerable and lasting changes in their understanding, attitudes and behaviors with regard to the United States and their own roles in their home communities. The impact of the program is best illustrated by the words of the participants themselves:

I started to reflect on something about all the different YES students I met. What I reflected on gave me back some hope and joy and a sense of togetherness. The YES program unites us all under one umbrella. It defines a common goal for us. I realized that under the YES program, we all have the same aim and objective to work on, and that is “promoting peace.” Although we are people of different colors, we are one and share the same goal! Indeed, different colors, one people!

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