

House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Submitted by Ilir Zherka
Executive Director, Alliance for International Exchange
Testimony on Fiscal Year 2019
Supporting U.S. Department of State Educational and Cultural Exchange Programs
April 20, 2018

As Executive Director of the Alliance for International Exchange, I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony supporting maintaining the Fiscal Year 2018 funding level of \$646.1 million, or the highest possible funding level, for educational and cultural exchange programs administered by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in Fiscal Year 2019.

As the collective public policy voice of the exchange community, the Alliance comprises over 90 nongovernmental organizations representing the international educational and cultural exchange community in the United States. We greatly appreciate our productive working relationship with the Subcommittee and its strong and consistent support for exchange programs.

This appropriation will allow the U.S. Department of State to fund educational and cultural exchange programs, a cost-effective public diplomacy tool, with unique capacities to adapt rapidly and effectively to foreign policy and national security priorities, while building relationships with strategic audiences in key countries. Exchange programs enable the U.S. to build relationships with current, emerging, and future leaders, and provide opportunities for engagement with youth, women and girls, as well as program alumni. It further allows the U.S. Department of State to provide opportunities for young Americans to study and research abroad, equipping them with the skill-set they need to succeed in today's global marketplace.

We believe U.S. funding for exchange programs should be balanced and strategic by reaching a range of people from many different countries. Our country is very well served by supporting: initiatives to discover and cultivate emerging leaders; language and area studies programs that prepare U.S. citizens for the workforce; capacity development for women; youth engagement; exchanges of cultural and artistic expression; interactions with international athletes; and virtual exchanges that connect people who are unable to travel. This comprehensive approach to exchanges has been very effective in advancing our nation's strategic interests and should be maintained.

Supporting U.S. national security

U.S. Department of State exchange programs allow the U.S. to engage with wide and diverse audiences and emerging leaders from around the world, many of them from countries key to our national security interests. American students studying abroad through U.S. Department of State exchange programs are ambassadors of the next generation of American leaders, highlighting our most promising young people and promoting American values around the world. U.S. Department of State evaluations repeatedly show that international exchange

participants who visit the United States complete their programs with a better impression of our country, the American people, and our values. U.S. ambassadors around the world consistently rank exchange programs among the most useful catalysts for long-term political change and mutual understanding. One in three current world leaders has participated in a U.S. Department of State exchange program. Notable exchange program alumni include 570 current or former heads of government, 84 Nobel Prize winners, 64 representatives to the United Nations, 31 heads of international organizations, and 97 members of the U.S. Congress, according to U.S. Department of State data.

Strengthening the U.S. economy

U.S. Department of State exchange programs are a cost-effective investment that not only enhance America's long-term competitiveness but also provide significant and immediate economic impact in communities across the country. Most of the U.S. Department of State exchanges budget is spent either on Americans, American businesses and organizations, or in the United States. The 425+ EducationUSA Advising Centers supported by the exchange program appropriation facilitated 1,078,822 international students coming to the U.S. in the 2016-17 academic year. These students who were enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities across the U.S. contributed \$36.9 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 450,331 jobs, according to NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Exchange participants and U.S. hosts completed over 600,000 hours of community service, according to the U.S. Department of State. Further, 86% of management-level employees at U.S. companies said in a 2014 survey that having more staff with international expertise would increase business. U.S. Department of State exchange programs provide opportunities for Americans to build international experience and connections, expand their global perspective, and gain foreign language and cross-cultural skills that are critical to business and national security.

Increasing mutual understanding

Exchange programs have a proven track record of building respect and increasing mutual understanding between Americans and citizens of countries around the world. For example, 94% of exchange students from Muslim-majority countries reported having a deeper, more favorable view of the American culture after their stay in the United States, according to a U.S. Department of State evaluation of the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program.

Support from Congress allows the U.S. Department of State to strategically align its programs with key U.S. foreign policy interests and to facilitate exchange experiences for more than 55,000 American and international exchange participants each year, including:

- Bringing emerging and future leaders to the U.S. on programs like the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program between the U.S. and countries with significant Muslim populations; the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program for high school students from Eurasia; the Young Leaders Initiatives in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Americas; and the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP);

- Expanding opportunities for young Americans to study abroad through programs like the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program;
- Continuing to engage students and scholars through the renowned Fulbright Program;
- Engaging and training young professionals through programs such as the Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange (CBYX); and
- Broadening engagement with youth, women and girls, as well as program alumni.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to express our support for maintaining the Fiscal Year 2018 funding level of \$646.1 million, or the highest possible funding level, for U.S. Department of State educational and cultural exchange programs in Fiscal Year 2019.

We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to ensure that international exchange programs continue to play a vital role in supporting U.S. national security, strengthening our economy, and increasing mutual understanding between the U.S. and countries around the world.

Thank you.