

# Evaluation Matters: Evaluation of the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) Program



## THE EVALUATION

**Why:** The in-depth independent evaluation examined the degree to which the NSLI-Y program is meeting its stated goals and outcomes, and the extent to which the program advances Department of State foreign policy priorities.

**What:** The evaluation addressed the following seven questions:

1. In what ways has participation in NSLI-Y contributed to alumni's language proficiency, academic development, career development, community projects/service initiatives, and personal development?
2. In what ways have NSLI-Y participants used or benefited

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## THE PROGRAM

The National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) is a program of the U.S. Department of State's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau (ECA) designed to increase the number of American youth (ages 15 to 18) who learn critical foreign languages in support of the U.S. foreign policy goals of increasing national security, promoting U.S. competitiveness, and involving the robust participation of youth. NSLI-Y programs accelerate and advance participants' language skills through a combination of structured classroom language instruction and less formal interactive and applied learning opportunities, including interaction with host families or peers, community service opportunities, and cultural activities. NSLI-Y provides merit-based scholarships for eligible U.S. high school students and recent graduates to learn languages not commonly taught in U.S. high schools. Participants study one of eight languages for a summer (six weeks) or an academic year (about 10 months), while living with a host family and immersed in the culture and day-to-day life of the host country.

## KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, NSLI-Y is a high-performing program that is achieving its long-term goals. In its first 14 years, NSLI-Y has achieved all ECA-established outcomes. More than 95% of alumni said the program met or exceeded their expectations, and 98.5% of alumni said they would encourage someone else to apply for a NSLI-Y scholarship. Key findings and conclusions include the following:

- » **Alumni Development:** The NSLI-Y experience positively influenced academic and career opportunities. Almost all alumni survey respondents agreed the NSLI-Y experience was valuable and improved their language proficiency. In fact, a majority of participants continued their language studies after the program and pursued language or cultural studies their academic careers. Although less than half of alumni indicated their current job responsibilities directly relate to the language training they received as part of their NSLI-Y experience, 86.3% agreed that the program led to a professional expertise they would otherwise have not developed and felt the program contributed to their professional career. Many also perceived the exchange program to have made their college and job applications more competitive.
- » **Cross-Cultural and Leadership Skills:** NSLI-Y participants improved their intercultural competencies. General intercultural competency is the skill that the most NSLI-Y alumni reported using in both their studies (97.1%) and their careers (91.2%). More than 80% of NSLI-Y alumni demonstrate leadership behaviors in school and at work. Across all interviews and



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## THE EVALUATION

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**from the cross-cultural and leadership skills they developed as an exchange student?**

3. **In what ways has participation in NSLI-Y allowed alumni to benefit their international host communities and U.S. home communities?**
4. **In what ways has the program influenced changes in participants' attitudes/perceptions of world views and host countries?**
5. **To what extent has NSLI-Y built lasting personal relationships and strengthened relations between the people of the United States and people of the host countries?**
6. **How does this program support the following U.S. foreign policy priorities?**

**Who:** ECA's Evaluation Division contracted Dexis Consulting Group to conduct the evaluation.

**When:**  
October 2018 – September 2020

**How Much:** \$655,265

focus groups, parents and alumni sang praises for the immersion aspect that allowed participants to “live the culture”, and forced them to learn things that would not be possible in a classroom setting. In addition to deepening their knowledge of their host country and its culture, alumni described a significant broadening of their worldviews and the ability to see multiple sides of an issue.

- » **Benefits to Hosts and Home Communities:** NSLI-Y contributed to “making the world seem smaller” in both host and home communities. Information-sharing was most commonly considered the most important benefit to both host and home communities. NSLI-Y participants shared U.S. culture and daily life with host families through daily interactions and answering questions about their homes. Upon their return, participants, especially those who returned to their high schools following their exchange, shared about their host country with members of their home communities.
- » **Lasting Personal Relationships:** Although NSLI-Y participants' ability to make social connections varied by host country, both alumni and host families noted that participants remain in contact with host families, friends, and others in their host communities, most commonly through social media. Alumni also keep in touch with the cohort of peers with whom they travelled.
- » **U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities:** Through the development of language, cross-cultural, and interpersonal skills, the NSLI-Y program supports the ability of U.S. institutions and firms to both compete and cooperate with counterparts in other countries. The program helps participants develop skills that prepare them for careers and volunteer work that contribute to the security and resiliency of American communities.

## INTEGRATING RECOMMENDATIONS

Four months after having received the final evaluation report, ECA has already acted upon key recommendations, including:

- » **Reduce or eliminate the summer programs' community service requirement.** Due to mixed perceptions about the usefulness of community service activities during the short NSLI-Y summer program, ECA has made community service activities optional for summer programs and emphasized to implementing partners that activities need to be aligned with language learning goals.
- » **Standardize parental communication practices.** ECA has updated implementing partner guidelines on communication with parents to ensure regular communication with parents throughout the program.
- » **Provide annual training on managing and reporting critical incidents involving participants.** As part of the NSLI-Y partners' annual meeting in January 2021, implementing partners shared best practices on-program support and were trained on managing group dynamics, and allyship and inclusiveness. ECA works to ensure that all staff are trained on managing and reporting critical incidents involving participants, and regularly reviews procedures and lessons learned.
- » **Increase the flexibility of language teaching.** ECA is currently pursuing a cooperative agreement award amendment to include funds for teacher and Resident Director/Local Coordinator training to better meet participants' language learning needs and improve on-program participant support.