YEAR Program participants arrived in Washington, D.C. on August 8th, 2016 for a three-day arrival orientation. Structured sessions on such topics as program requirements, academic expectations, cross-cultural communication, American culture, and strategies for success helped the newly arrived students begin preparing for their time in the U.S. YEAR participants also had an important opportunity to reflect on their personal, academic, and professional goals for the program, to discuss in detail key cultural differences between the U.S. and Russia, and to get to know their fellow program participants as well as American Councils staff. The orientation also included a tour of Washington’s major monuments which allowed participants to kick-start their exploration of the United States.

The Year of Exchange in America for Russians (YEAR) Program provides outstanding Russian students with the opportunity to study for one year at community colleges and universities throughout the United States. Participants engage with local communities, help Americans learn about Russia’s history and culture, and gain a new perspective on American society. All YEAR students live either in campus dormitories or with American host families. The YEAR Program is funded by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and administered by American Councils for International Education.
STUDENTS EXPLORE D.C. & GIVE BACK DURING “EXTENSION WEEK”

Following their arrival orientation, those students whose host universities began classes later in the month remained in D.C. to take part in cultural, recreational, and community service activities. YEAR participants visited many of D.C.’s prominent historical and educational attractions such as the Smithsonian museums, the National Cathedral, the U.S. Capitol building, the National Zoo, and more. They also attended a musical performance at the Millennium Stage and a Broadway musical at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. For many students, the highlight of the extension week was a contra dance event hosted by Friday Night Dancers in Glen Echo Park, Maryland, during which participants danced with local community members and learned about American folk culture.

YEAR students also engaged in community service activities at Eco City Farms and D.C. Central Kitchen. A non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing food security and improving nutrition, Eco City Farms provides fresh produce to the local community and works to educate the public about sustainable urban farming techniques. At the farm, YEAR participants helped pick produce, tend to crops, and lay bricks in the greenhouse. At D.C. Central Kitchen, a local non-profit organization providing meals to the hungry and homeless communities in D.C., students worked alongside the organization’s regular staff to process potatoes, package beans, and assemble nutritional food bags to be distributed to over 1,500 individuals. In reflection sessions following the service activities, many YEAR students stated that the projects motivated them to continue seeking civic engagement opportunities in the United States and at home.

LEADERS ON CAMPUS

Two YEAR participants have taken on leadership positions on their host campuses. Razim, a YEAR student from Ufa studying at Fox Valley Technical College, was elected President of the International Student Club in the fall semester. Additionally, Evgeniia, a YEAR student from Snezhinsk, was named International Student Club Treasurer at Saginaw Valley State University. Both students are enjoying working with their international and domestic student peers and are looking forward to planning new activities in the spring.
Eighteen host institutions and their respective communities welcomed YEAR students at the start of the 2016-17 academic year. A wide range of orientation programs and welcome events helped the new students integrate into campus life and prepare for a successful year of study in the U.S. Many students expressed excitement upon arriving at their host communities and institutions. Below are a few of their impressions at the start of the school year:

“I’m very lucky to get to this place! …the campus is brilliant, the city and the region fascinate me, students and people are very friendly… I’m looking forward to starting classes.”

-Marat, Moscow – University of Wyoming

“I am here truly enjoying my American college life… I live in the country and I like it. I was born and raised in the city and I never had a chance to live in a rural area. But now I see the most beautiful sunsets… I have an endless lawn in the yard and a beautiful garden with the swing. My host-family are the kindest people I have ever met and are my friends till the end of my life.”

-Elizaveta, Naberezhnye Chelny – Fox Valley Technical College

“I love the town! …after the completion of the arrival orientation I found out that there is an uncountable amount of clubs and activities I can attend and so many cultures to explore! It’s so easy to make new connections – I can just stop by someone’s door and start talking to a new person. Each of these conversations extends my outlook.”

-Vladimir, Saratov – University of South Dakota

“When I just landed in Hawaii and walked down the plane, I immediately felt the gentle oceanic breeze on my face; it had the smell of tropical flowers mixed with the salt of the ocean. ‘I’m in paradise!’ – That was the thought that suddenly came into my mind. I remember how my host family met me in the airport. They put a flower necklace – lei – on me. It’s a Hawaiian tradition, gesture to show love and appreciation for a person. I remember their faces, both curious and cautious; they said that they are always here to help me. Indeed, my host family became a first step in discovering real American culture.”

-Veronika, Novosibirsk – Hawaii Pacific University

“I like American kindness and desire to help you. It was so unexpected when I just walked through the street and some people asked me “How are you?”, “What’s up, man?” or “Can I help you?” when I didn’t know the way. Americans are very polite. In the beginning of a conversation they always inquire “How is it going?” and then wish you to have a good day or a nice weekend. This kind of behavior and smiling face surprised me in a good way. I felt that people are interested in me and I won’t be alone for my YEAR.”

-Andrei, Bryansk – West Virginia University

“When I arrived at the university’s campus everybody was very hospitable, nice, and tried to help me. Besides, there was no time to be home-sick because WLU’s International Student office has scheduled a variety of events for international students including an international students’ picnic, race boat regatta and many other activities. It was also very interesting to make friends from other countries who are international students in WLU like me.”

-Elina, Moscow – West Liberty University

“One thing about Otero and La Junta is its nature. Campus is really close to the park with super green lawns and a beautiful pond with lots of ducks in it. And the sky. The sky here is just out of this world. It’s fantastic blue color throughout the day, beautifully pink in the evening, and full of stars at night. I wish I was good with astronomy so I could just lie down on the grass and name all the different constellations. Seriously, if you’ll ever be here, wait until the sun goes down, lie down somewhere outside, put your headphones on, and listen to some jazz while watching the sky. This will be the best experience in your entire life.”

-Alexandra, Omsk – Otero Junior College

Finding the right words can be difficult in your own language, but even more so in another. Nevertheless, the challenges that came with being on the university debate team did not stop Dmitrii, a YEAR participant from Smolensk studying at American University, from pushing himself to master the English language in a completely new way.

Though Dmitrii recalls that his first debate tournament was overwhelming and left him feeling discouraged, it only increased his motivation to be an asset to his team. He arrived in Pittsburg, PA for his second tournament well prepared to speak about such complex subjects as the American legal system, feminism, and the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Dmitrii’s hard work and commitment to overcoming language barriers paid off. He was recognized at the tournament as one of the Top Ten Novice Speakers, leaving him with a sense of self-improvement and accomplishment.
FAMILY FOR A YEAR, FAMILY FOREVER

Anastasiia, a YEAR student at Fox Valley Technical College who was born and raised in Moscow, reports that she’s found a second family in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Anastasiia comments that many people have inquired about her experience living with a host family, and she responds that it has been the most valuable part of her experience because her host mother and sister feel like a real family. Together, Anastasiia and her host family have visited parks across Wisconsin, volunteered in Milwaukee, celebrated the holidays, and attended a Packers football game in Green Bay. Anastasiia’s family has been beside her every step of the way. They have not missed an opportunity to attend her talent show performances and culture nights on campus. Anastasiia in turn has been one of her host sister’s biggest supporters at her local bowling tournaments.

The beginning of 2016 was filled with loss for Anastasiia’s host family. Her host sister Aly explains that after the passing of her grandmother and great-grandmother, she and her mother were left grieving and feeling disheartened. Aly comments that Anastasiia’s infectious energy and optimism has made their year much brighter. “I like having a big sister – someone to encourage me to do the things I want to do, and just be there to support me,” Aly says. “And that has totally made my 2016 better, as I would still have little memories of my grandmother and great grandmother and cry, but it is so fun to have her here to make me feel better if I cry! Anastasiia is so helpful, thankful, thoughtful, kind, sweet... she is just the best ever.”

“I cannot express how honored I am to be here today and give this speech as one of Year of Exchange in America for Russian Program awardees. I’m incredibly grateful for having been chosen for this award along with 70 other talented students from Russia. I must say that this was a long and hard way to the dream, but we made it - congratulations.

I know personally how much effort every one of you put into this program. I know how much it means to all of you, your families, and your friends... this year is going be an unforgettable one, a year full of adventures, a year full of discoveries. And I hope that everyone will spend this year productively and efficiently, and get as much as possible from this.”

SPEAKING OF THE YEAR PROGRAM...

In the fall semester, Anastasiia, a YEAR student from Bratsk, enrolled in a public speaking course at the University of Minnesota. One of her speeches focused on the YEAR Program and the unique opportunities it has provided her with. Anastasiia’s speech, written as an address to her fellow YEAR participants, reflects on the program’s meaning for her:

“Living with a host family might be the biggest concern and biggest challenge of the whole exchange experience. But if you are considered as a member of the family and treated as one, you will have only one challenge left – how to leave these people and this life with them afterward...”

-Anastasiia
Aleksandra speaks at the United Nations headquarters

A NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENT

Vladimir, a YEAR student from Saratov, has found a rich and rewarding environment in which to explore his passion for music at the University of South Dakota (USD). In November, Vladimir was selected by his professor to play at USD’s university-wide piano recital, during which he performed “Sonetto 104 del Petrarca” from Liszt’s Years of Pilgrimage from memory.

Through his university’s music department, Vladimir also had the opportunity to attend a concert by renowned pianist Ingrid Filter in November. One of Argentina’s most famous pianists, Filter delivered a performance at USD that, Vladimir writes, was filled with “sudden short pauses, fluent finger technique and expressive body movement” that reached to the “depths of his soul.” After witnessing her inspiring performance, Vladimir was one of four students invited by his piano professor at USD to participate in a piano master class with Filter during her visit on campus. Vladimir reports that during the master class, Filter’s great sense of humor and her ability to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in his playing gave him new insights into each piece that he performs.

In addressing what role music plays in his life, Vladimir writes, “My major is computer science, but music is one of my biggest passions in life. I don’t like the word “hobby” applied to this side of my life as I consider it very important; not only it helps to strengthen my cognitive abilities for any other kind of activities, but it may as well also help me to build my professional career in an interdisciplinary field combining IT with music.”
LEARNING ABOUT CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Julia, a YEAR student from Cherepovets, and Anastasiia, a participant from Khanty-Mansiysk, took a proactive approach to the challenges they encountered in the classroom during their first few weeks at Northern Arizona University (NAU) by helping to facilitate a cross-cultural communication training session for some of the university’s professors. An initiative of the NAU International Student Office, this informal training in the beginning of September aimed to educate professors on how differences in class atmosphere, lecture style, and language can create confusion for incoming international students.

Julia and Anastasiia played a key role in the training session by providing feedback about what it was like to adjust to a new language atmosphere and academic culture. The training initiated an open conversation between professors and three of the university’s international students about best practices in a multicultural and multilingual classroom. Julia and Anastasiia provided particularly important insights into the specific challenges that arise with language barriers. Reflecting on topics they covered at the training, Anastasiia writes, “…we discussed the idea that asking the question “Do you understand?” after explaining something is a little bit insulting for an international student, as it is difficult to confess that you have not understood anything. The better way of asking those types of questions is, “Do you have any questions, comments, thoughts?” As for me, I really appreciate when professors ask it in this way, without any pressure.”

Both students affirm that the training was beneficial. While many universities strive to create a globally oriented campus, conversations such as this one serve to further strengthen the bonds between international students and the academic community.

FOSTERING CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

Many YEAR students have organized cultural presentations, performances, and special dinners to help the members of their host communities learn more about Russian culture.

Polina, a student from Tambov studying at West Virginia University, participated in the International Street Festival held for the public in her community of Morgantown, West Virginia in early fall. As a member of the International Student Club, Polina volunteered to perform a Russian dance at the festival on the square. Polina says that she is honored to have participated in such an impactful cultural event in her community and is thankful to have met many new people as a result. Polina adds that this performance was also a personal achievement for her, as it was her first time performing for such a large crowd. She left the event with greater self-confidence, as both a dancer and a cultural ambassador.

YEAR participants at West Virginia University gathered to cook a Russian meal in early October for about 25 of their fellow students as a part of a series of cultural dinners hosted by the international students on campus. Together, Julia (Ukhta), Daria (Korsakov), Andrei (Bryansk), Aleksandra (Moscow), and Polina (Tambov) made Russian pancakes and salads for the event. Julia says that both the American and international attendees loved their pancakes, or blini. Furthermore, the meal served as a great catalyst for a dialogue about the attendees’ national cuisines and cultures. Blini may be growing in popularity across the U.S., as the YEAR students at Saginaw Valley State University also cooked a large batch of pancakes to share with their peers, faculty, and administrators during the International Food Festival in honor of International Education Week in November. Maria, a YEAR participant from Novosibirsk, estimates that 800-900 guests attended the event, and many enjoyed Russian blini, borshch, and salads prepared by the YEAR students.

Aina (Ekaterinoslavka) and Maria (Kostroma), students at the University of Wyoming, also took advantage of International Education Week as a chance to showcase their culture. They took first prize in the cultural table-top display contest and performed ‘Kalinka,’ a famous Russian folk song and dance, in the campus cultural production. Aina also sang the Russian song “Still Love” by A-Studio. After the performance, other students eagerly joined them to learn the steps to ‘Kalinka.’

At Fox Valley Technical College, YEAR participants presented their cultures at the Host Family Culture Night. Anya (Ufa), Elizaveta (Naberezhnye Chelny), and Anastasiia (Moscow) created a colorful poster and table-top display about Russia and engaged attendees in conversations about their country. Elizaveta showed off her country’s traditional clothing by wearing a Russian dress sewn by her mother. The audience was deeply impressed by the event. Many host families reported that the program was a highlight of the semester and a wonderful way to celebrate the cultures of the students living among them.
During their first semester in the United States, all 70 YEAR participants successfully completed the program’s required 20 hours of community service. In total, the YEAR students donated over 1,500 hours of their time to improving their communities, while getting a glimpse of volunteerism in the United States along the way.

Andrei, a YEAR student at the University of Minnesota, had the opportunity to volunteer at the polls during the election in November. Andrei says that while his job was simple – preparing ballots for processing – it was remarkable to be part of such a historic event. He was also surprised to see that the voting process was driven by volunteers. Andrei comments that working among such a large group of volunteers helped him understand the impact they can have on their communities and nation.

Aina was impressed by the volunteer spirit at her school, the University of Wyoming, after participating in the annual Big Event, which fosters strong relations between the university and town by bringing students together to serve and give thanks to their community. During the event, Aina and Marat, YEAR participants from Ekaterinoslavka and Moscow, respectively, painted a fence for a local homeowner who had requested help. Aina writes, “This event showed to me the strength of Laramie’s community and students’ interest in making it better.”

Aida, a YEAR student from Ufa studying at Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana, decided to dedicate some of her community service hours to helping animals. She had a unique and memorable experience volunteering at the Fort Wayne Zoo, where she was primarily assigned to working with the penguins. The highlight of her experience was caring for the baby penguins. She was trained to mix their food, prepare their vitamins, and even got a chance to feed them herself. Aida comments, “Community is a really important part of all Americans’ lives… I think that it’s really nice to help people (and not just people!)”

In the small-town community of Lexington, North Carolina, Nikita, a YEAR participant from Khabarovsk, dedicated his time to sharing his knowledge of computer programming at a local IT company near his host institution, Davidson County Community College. After being trained by his company in two new programming languages, Nikita completed several projects for the company and used his knowledge to develop proposals for new ventures. Nikita reports that through his volunteer work he gained substantial knowledge and experience that will aid him in his future endeavor to start his own IT company upon returning to Russia.

Konstantin (Moscow), Veronika (Novosibirsk), and Elizaveta (Samara), three YEAR students at Hawaii Pacific University, promoted international education in their state by volunteering with the Pacific and Asian Affairs Councils (PAAC), which works to build the next generation of global leaders. Their efforts supported the staging of two events: WorldQuest, a competition which challenged students’ knowledge about international affairs,
and a conference titled ‘The Plight of the Refugee,’ which educated participants about international conflict and refugee movements around the world. Konstantin, Veronika, and Elizaveta’s leadership during the events contributed to knowledge sharing among the hundreds of attendees from both the U.S. and Japan.

Vladimir, a YEAR student from Saratov studying at the University of South Dakota, has been passionate about giving back to communities since the start of the YEAR Program. Vladimir demonstrated a strong interest in Eco City Farm’s work to improve the nutrition and health of low income families. He visited the farm outside Washington, D.C. with other YEAR participants to learn about its activities and help with its important work as part of the program’s extension week activities in August. During the visit, Vladimir engaged the farm’s staff in a detailed discussion about their mission and operations. Since then, Vladimir has dedicated a total of 57 hours to community service, the highest among YEAR participants. In Vermillion, he has focused his community service work on environmental clean-ups and animal rescue.

YEAR students have participated in a wide range of additional community service projects. Among other service activities, they have served in soup kitchens, prepared Christmas gifts for children of low-income families, tutored students in Russian, and volunteered at the local Children’s Museum.

ASKING QUESTIONS IS THE ANSWER

Julia, a YEAR participant from Kazan studying at Ivy Tech Community College, had the opportunity to see Jeb Bush speak in Fort Wayne, IN in early September. The event, entitled “Leadership, Redefined: An Evening with Jeb Bush” was part of the Omnibus lecture series held at Indiana University-Purdue University. Julia reports that she was excited to be able to attend a lecture by a national political figure and to learn more about the U.S. electoral system.

Julia writes that she was particularly impressed by the detailed question and answer session with audience members that followed the candidate’s speech. She adds that this event, along with many of her other experiences on the YEAR Program, has enriched and broadened her world view.

“I am so thankful to every person who made this program possible... because the most important thing it gives to the participants is the experience. By observing the world, you see that there are always more ‘life approaches’ than it may seem at the first sight. This skill allows you to be much more effective in every sphere of your life: instead of thinking narrowly you start to discover other possible ways of coping with this world, you start to see ways of living which you probably never considered before.”
Eager to experience the atmosphere of college sports in the U.S., Anna, a YEAR student from Kursk, joined the volleyball team at Alcorn State University in Mississippi. She writes that she was impressed by both the many hours each member put into the team and the strong team spirit generated by each player’s dedication. Anna and her teammates attended practice twice a day, studied together between practices, and participated in community service projects. Anna writes that she is grateful to her fellow players for welcoming her to the team so openly.

Julia (Cherepovets) decided to be adventurous and try something new at the University of Northern Arizona by joining the rugby team. Based on her experience, Julia has the following advice for her fellow YEAR students: “Join some clubs! It will make your year so much fun! Even if you have no experience whatsoever, just take a risk and try! I joined the women’s rugby team - something I’ve never done before - and have no regrets! I met so many wonderful people and learned so many interesting things thanks to it. I even had the opportunity to travel across the state of Arizona to compete in Rugby tournaments.”

Actively involved in track and field at her home university in Moscow, Elina was eager to join the cross country and track teams while studying at West Liberty University on the YEAR Program. She writes that her personal times have improved this year, and she has participated in track meets throughout West Virginia and surrounding states. Being a team member has also helped Elina develop lasting friendships with her peers and coaches, with whom she’s spent several holidays.

“MY TRACK TEAM IS LIKE A FAMILY FOR ME IN THE U.S.!”

-Elina
Exploring the U.S. has been a goal of many YEAR students. Holiday breaks and weekends allowed fellows to discover diverse cultures, climates, and communities within the United States.

YEAR students have traveled widely during holidays and semester breaks to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse cultures that comprise the U.S. and to see first-hand many of the country’s most famous and inspiring sights. Many participants have explored the American wilderness as well as its national parks and monuments, including Mount Rushmore, Yellowstone National Park, the Colorado Rocky Mountains, and Sequoia National Park. “It’s so exciting when you have an opportunity to value nature,” comments Narmin, a YEAR student from Kazan studying at Northwest College in Wyoming. Aleksandra, a YEAR participant from Moscow, reports that climbing Guadalupe Peak in Texas was the most rewarding and challenging part of a mid-year trip that took her from West Virginia all the way to California. Other YEAR participants have visited cities throughout the country, including Boulder, Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Orlando, San Diego and San Francisco. Evgenia, a YEAR student from Snezhinsk currently studying at Saginaw Valley State University, writes that the people she met during her trip along the California coast “kept her smiling all the time.” Aleksandra echoes this sentiment, expressing that it was the friends she made on her travels that made the experience so priceless. Alisa and Anna, two YEAR participants from Bolshoy Kamen and Kursk, respectively, traveled extensively by bus during their winter break, heading south from their home campus at Alcorn State University to New Orleans, and then east to Key West, Florida, observing the Mississippi delta and the American deep south as they covered the miles via Greyhound. YEAR participants consistently write that they have been deeply impressed by the wide range of languages, cultures, and people they encounter in their travels.

“THE UNITED STATES IS ONE OF THE MOST DIVERSE & PICTURESQUE COUNTRIES I’VE SEEN... IT WAS A CHANCE TO FALL IN LOVE WITH AMERICA ONCE AGAIN, & I’M FOREVER GRATEFUL I’VE GOT IT.” -Aleksandra