Administering Youth Exchange Guide

The U.S. High Schools’ Guide on International Student Exchange

Section 3

“How Youth Exchange Programs Operate”
How Youth Exchange Programs Operate

The successful operation of a youth exchange program requires the careful cooperation of many partners. A student is usually recruited by an exchange organization that is based in his or her home country. A partner exchange program in the destination country sponsors the student, with their local coordinators identifying a host family and, in the case of a semester or year-long exchange, a school willing to host the student.

**Student Recruitment**

The process begins with the recruitment of students. In the case of exchange programs bringing students to the United States, the American organization enters into a contractual agreement with an overseas partner to recruit international students; and if offering an outbound program for Americans, for that organization to host American students. Some organizations have related or affiliated organizations abroad while other organizations work with an independent partner. Program promotion and selection activities usually occur well in advance of the exchange period, often up to a year earlier. Some countries may have a large number of organizations advertising and recruiting for exchange programs, so prospective students have many options. Many students apply to more than one program and make their decisions based on references, prices, and subjective factors.

**Program Pricing**

Pricing for exchange programs includes fees assessed by the two partnering exchange organizations and varies depending on what is included and on market factors in each country. Fees cover program services, such as the recruitment, screening, and orientation of students; support to the student’s natural parents and host parents during the program; assistance in obtaining the proper visa; monitoring and counseling the student during the program; and overhead costs of operating the program. Prices may also include international transportation, transportation within the destination country, and health insurance.

**Screening Participating Students**

One of the most important functions performed by the home country organization is the screening of students. Using guidelines provided by the destination country partner, the organization begins the student assessment and screening process. A personal interview with each student assesses the motivation and expectations for the exchange. At least a portion of this session is conducted in the language of the destination country as a preliminary assessment of the student's language ability. Most organizations also interview the parent/guardian in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the applicant and his/her reasons for participation in an exchange program. The organization may then ask the student to complete a comprehensive application, which includes school transcripts, teacher references, medical history, student and parent letters as well as answers to program specific question. Many organizations also require a language proficiency test (*Note: This test may soon be required by DOS in new J-Visa Regulations Sub-part A*)
How Youth Exchange Programs Operate

Screening Participating Students continued

While all exchange students coming to the United States must have a level of English which will allow them to function in the U.S. high school after an initial adjustment period, most American students can qualify for an exchange program without meeting minimum language requirements. Most overseas hosting organizations offer supplemental language learning at their orientation for American students, and foreign high schools agree to enroll such students, since many American students don't have the level of language competency which would prepare them for study in the school system abroad.

Another program component handled by the home country partner is that of assisting the student with the process of obtaining the proper visa documents. In the case of exchange students coming to the United States for a semester or year, the U.S. organization most often issues the accepted student a DS-2019 form to present to a U.S. embassy along with a valid passport, photos, visa and Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) fees in order to obtain a J-1 exchange visitor visa valid for the duration of the program. In some cases, exchange students utilize the F-1 visa (I-20 form) where the school is the legal visa sponsor. (For more visa and SEVIS information)

Student Admissions

Although the student assessment process begins with the sending organization, the final decision of student acceptance rests with the exchange organization in the host country. Each organization in the United States carefully reviews students' complete applications to determine if the students' qualifications meet the standards required. Applications are also assessed for qualities that result in a successful exchange, such as flexibility and adaptability.

Once a student is accepted, the process of finding a suitable host family and school begins. Student applications are sent to field staff, who search for a host family and school to host the student.

The organization in the destination country usually charges the recruiting partner a flat fee for their part of the program. These fees are used to operate the program in the destination country. The most important component of every exchange program is the group of committed people who work for it. They range from managerial and operational staff at the program's headquarters to the regional and local coordinators who work in the field finding host families, coordinating with high schools for student enrollment, and supporting students through the difficult and complex process of cultural adjustment.
How Youth Exchange Programs Operate

Host Families

Families who agree to host exchange students are also active partners. Once carefully selected and screened (including a criminal background check), they provide housing, meals, and local transportation for exchange students, but in reality they do much more. Host parents are the surrogate parents for an exchange student with all of the rewards and challenges of parenting. The destination country partner organization provides host families with orientation and resources to prepare them for this experience, stressing that the essential quality of a successful host family is patience and open and constant communication with the exchange student. Exchange students need time and understanding to help them adjust to a completely different way of life, far from the comfortable familiarity of home. Both students and host families have the support of the local coordinator and operational staff in making these adjustments. However, the student and the host family do the most important work on a day-to-day basis.

Schools

The school component of an exchange rounds out the program, giving exchange students exposure to the host country’s educational system and its role in the life of that country’s teenagers. While exchange students to the United States generally are academically equipped to succeed in an American high school, an adjustment period is necessary for even the most successful students. The high school environment in other countries is often more formal with few of the extracurricular activities common to most American high schools. The educational system in many countries does not allow interaction between students and teachers, so that exchange students also have to adjust to being an active participant in most American classrooms. Additionally, even students with excellent English skills can require a few weeks to become comfortable communicating in a second language. Participating high schools should rely on the expertise of program personnel to deal with any adjustment problems. Communication among the school, student, host family and program officials is essential during this period so that misunderstandings or special needs may be addressed before they become more serious.

American students planning to study abroad for an academic year or semester program are encouraged to work with their home high school in advance to make arrangements for credit for their work abroad. U.S. high schools are encouraged to be flexible in granting full credit to their American students for foreign language, mathematics, science, and social studies and literature courses taken abroad. Students who require U.S. history or English literature in order to graduate are encouraged to double up the year before or after their exchange, or make up the requirement via correspondence or summer school coursework.