Connecting Youth to a Digital World

“Everywhere I go, educators are asking: ‘How can we prepare our young people to succeed in an interconnected and borderless world?’” explains Dr. Yvonne Andres, CEO of GlobalSchoolNet.org and a co-chair of the SEE Education and Youth Working Group.

Children are coming of age in a digital world of instantaneous information and blurred geographical boundaries. Educators in Russia and the US encounter a common challenge of incorporating globalized connectedness in their classrooms.

In response to this challenge, the Education and Youth Working Group mobilized in-depth research, internet conferencing, and social media networking to transform community opportunities for youth.

Entitled “Open Doors,” the working group’s project promotes project-based learning, volunteerism, and collaboration between schools and non-governmental organizations. The overall goal, according to Andres, is to “[get] young people involved in activities that contribute to their local communities as well as the global community as a whole.”

SEE Featured as Innovator in US-Russia Cooperation

Minnesota may be a curious winter tourist destination for Russians seeking to escape their own frigid temperatures. So, why did representatives of Russian businesses, universities, and regional governments head to Minneapolis this past March? The reason was the three-day US-Russia Innovation Conference.

“Minnesota and the entire Upper Midwest region has a very diverse economy, much like Russia, and there are many firms who are very interested in meeting with [Russians] and exploring potential collaborations,” Minnesota Secretary of State and head conference organizer Mark Ritchie explained as the motivation behind this event.

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After learning about SEE, Secretary Ritchie invited the program to co-sponsor the conference and feature the projects implemented by SEE participants. Seven SEE working groups, as well as implementers of two linkage projects, showcased their innovative activities.

Public Health Working Group’s US co-chair Judy Twigg spoke about SEE as a model for structuring US-Russia collaborations to maximize innovation, while her Russian counterpart Elena Dmitrieva described her involvement in the mobile health (“mHealth”) linkage project as an example of innovations in healthcare. Additionally, SEE Emerging Professional Fellow Sergey Golubev shared his expertise on innovations in education.

Also at the conference, the Community Development and the Protection of Flora and Fauna working groups presented their projects on promoting sustainable development and nature preserves during a gathering of experts at the Minnesota Zoo.

While the conference took place at a difficult juncture in US-Russia relations, in the end participants came away with renewed hope for future US-Russia collaboration.
"Familiar questions, solved in a different way; totally new knowledge and skills, allowing us to look at the situation from a new angle; amazing opportunities to visit iconic American landscapes." This is how Anna Zavadskaya, a fellow in the US-Russia Social Expertise Exchange (SEE), described her experience in the U.S.

An environmental scientist, Zavadskaya was selected to complete her fellowship as part of the Protection of Flora and Fauna Working Group. She spent eight weeks examining and comparing environmental management of protected areas in the US and Russia.

Seventy-four other emerging professionals and advanced practitioners, similarly connected with SEE’s diverse thematic working groups, traveled to the US or Russia to advance the groups’ projects and gain important professional experience.

This first cohort of SEE fellows was a diverse and accomplished group, coming from 16 US states and 17 Russian regions. They brought many perspectives into the program and came from backgrounds as diverse as journalism, social entrepreneurship, academia, community development, social work, law and business.

Following the official fellowship launch event in Washington, DC in January, 2014, SEE fellows traveled to 17 Russian regions and 26 US states to spend time at host organizations closely associated with their working groups as well as with their own professional interests and expertise.

"I’ve learned best practices in economic and community development, green infrastructure, arts and culture, youth involvement from US non-commercials, social business, academic institutions, and government,” Community Development’s Eleonora Ignatovich summarized her experiences at organizations in New Mexico and Ohio.

"Actually being in the villages and towns near which these preserves are located, you gain an understanding of the mindset of locals and their attitudes. Learning of the actual culture, you develop a deeper understanding as to the obstacles, goals, and motivations for these preservation systems,” Flora and Fauna’s Pavel Dimens described his time exploring the Siberian nature preserves.

Other fellows had similarly enriching professional experiences, which they were able to take home to apply in their local communities. For example, Gender Equity fellow Paytsar Danielyan proceeded to organize several roundtables to share her experiences and jumpstart new initiatives for prevention of domestic violence in her local community of Orel, Russia.

The first round of the SEE Fellowship program concluded in June, 2014, but the linkages established during the fellowships will continue to live on through the fellows’ professional work, their collaboration in SEE working groups, the newly established SEE Fellowship Alumni Network, and through future rounds of fellowship exchanges.

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There are over 100,000 children waiting to be adopted in both the US and Russia.

To accelerate adoption rates and spread awareness, Child Protection Working Group members and fellows spent this year comparing child welfare systems in the two countries. Along with holding workshops, roundtables, and training sessions, the group produced a comprehensive analysis cataloguing best practices in order to enhance the improvement of child protection institutions.

“For Russia, the concept of family and mentor recruitment… is a new approach for working with adolescent orphans,” observes Anna Koudria, head of Kidsave Russia and a coordinator for the SEE Child Protection Working Group.

As a result of the working group’s awareness-raising efforts, these recruitment processes are now being integrated into the Russian child protection system.

US participants also gained valuable perspectives from this collaboration. “At every Russian agency we visited,” says Ilze Earner, Associate Professor of Social Work at Hunter College, who served as an SEE fellow, “the staff – from director to cook – has all largely been there for ten or more years. That is stability, especially for kids who don’t have to get used to a new social worker every six months as in the US.”

Most recently, Koudria and SEE fellow Galina Semya presented the group’s achievements at the US-Russia Business Council (USRBC) Corporate Social Responsibility Roundtable in Moscow in September, 2014. Addressing representatives from the corporate, government, and non-profit sectors, they spoke about possibilities for cross-sector collaboration in finding creative solutions to move orphans more quickly into family situations.

Working group members Galina Semya (center) and Anna Koudria (right) present at the USRBC roundtable in Moscow.
Bard and Smolny Turn Contemporaries into Colleagues

They have been down the same path. But they had never met as a group. They are the university faculty, administrators and experts running US-Russia dual and joint degree programs.

Enter Jonathan Becker, Vice President and Dean of International Affairs at Bard College and member of the SEE Higher Education Working Group. Together with Bard’s long-standing partners at Smolny College in St. Petersburg, Becker won SEE linkage funding to organize the first-ever US-Russia Joint/Dual Degree Conference in New York in January 2014.

Becker calls these Russian and US programs “deep partnerships” because they have withstood the pressures of global turmoil and funding.

Becker and his Smolny colleagues Philip Fedchin and Valery Monakhov sought to create a binational network of educators uniting existing U.S.-Russia degree programs, which up until recently existed without consistent communication or collaboration.

The attendees represented a range of partners, from the highly experienced to those just starting out and ready to learn. They shared eagerly about challenges ranging from curriculum development to language capability to retention of faculty and student interest.

During the conference, SEE’s Higher Education Working Group presented their project – to produce an exhaustive joint degree guidebook called Partnerships between US and Russian Universities: From Motivations to Results.

The guidebook’s goal, says SEE fellow Elena Abrosimova, is to build understanding, so that universities “may better comprehend the problems that can arise while organizing collaboration…, and so they see what motivates American [or Russian] universities that are seeking partnerships.”

Authored by working group members and fellows as a ‘how-to’ manual for US-Russian university collaboration, the publication consists of two distinct nationally-targeted editions. It provides a frank discussion of challenges posed by issues of funding, program longevity, differences in academic traditions and student culture shock. The guidebook is scheduled for release in October, 2014.

By the time the conference participants went their separate ways, Novgorod State University had begun to find common purpose with UMass Amherst, and six other Russian universities had expressed interest in joint programs with US institutions.

Thanks to the efforts of Bard and Smolny Colleges, these educators can also now avail themselves of a new online forum, where they can share valuable knowledge and network with their colleagues. Universities can also take advantage of the working group’s guidebook, and find insight tailored to each country’s distinct conditions, concerns, and cultural understandings of the contemporary university.