



An Evaluation of the Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) in Eurasia

Executive Report

July 2005

In January 2004, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the Department of State selected Aguirre International to conduct an evaluation of the Internet Access and Training Program. The IATP Program, which began in 1995, is administered by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs. Funding is provided by the U.S. Congress under the Freedom for Russian and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets (FREEDOM) Support Act of 1992.

The Internet Access and Training Program provides free Internet access and training through a network of access sites (or Centers) in 11 countries throughout Eurasia. Via these sites, USG alumni and members of the community have free-of-charge access to both the Internet and training in a wide variety of computer programs and applications. The overarching goal of the program, beyond access and enhanced skills, is to foster a community of users committed to the free exchange of information, the cornerstone of a free and democratic society.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

The Internet Access and Training Program (IATP) continues to fill a crucial need in Eurasia. The demand for the services, especially by community users, exceeds the capacity of many IATP Centers. Many community users are young people and students whose technology needs are for basic computer literacy and research and job search skills. Alumni use of the Centers varies and consists of advanced computer training, web design and creation, HTML, graphics software, and contact with host families and host institutions. IATP Centers, especially outside the larger cities, additionally serve as community centers for alumni where they can meet, share experiences, plan events, and network.

In addition to providing access and networks, IATP has engaged ECA alumni in training community users, conducting mobile training in rural areas, hosting seminars, and working with NGOs to increase their capacities. Regional networking has been achieved through user communications with colleagues in their fields of specialization in other countries, with universities, with associations, and in pursuit of further educational opportunities.

IATP Centers are hosted by partner institutions, which normally provide space, utilities, and security for the site. Partner organizations benefit from hosting IATP Centers in the form of basic computer literacy training for partner employees, website hosting, web design training, and special trainings in specific fields. These partner organizations are the likely heirs of the IATP Centers, but without newfound sources of support and revenue as U.S. Government funds diminish, many will not be sustainable. Centers must begin to think creatively about offering selected fee-for-service programs, balancing the conflicting needs of securing new revenue and providing access and training to those who would not otherwise be connected. If collaborative groups (NGOs, alumni organizations, local government, schools, universities, and civic organizations) can be leveraged to organize in support of the IATP Centers, the chances for sustainability will be greatly increased.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Currently, the IATP supports about 250 Internet access sites throughout Eurasia. Project Harmony manages the IATP in Russia, and IREX in the rest of Eurasia. The location of each Center is selected based on alumni estimates in the area, location, accessibility, partner cost share and Public Affairs Section at the U.S. Embassy approval. Capital cities often host more than one IATP Center, while the others are located in more semi-urban and rural towns. In-country partner institutions include libraries, universities, secondary schools, and non-governmental organizations. Each IATP Center is equipped with four to 15 computers and other equipment. A combination of Program staff and volunteers provide training ranging from basic and advanced computer use to professional and personal development.

KEY PROGRAM ACTIVITIES (OUTCOMES)

In order for IATP to reach its overarching goals, the implementers of the Program must:

- Encourage users of the Centers to develop and promote contacts and links with non-profits and academic institutions in the region and worldwide;
- Create methods and media, and encourage alumni to do so as well, for alumni and others to be in contact via the Web;
- Develop and carry out plans for organizational training and support for local initiatives, engaging community activists and alumni, especially where these overlap;
- Develop activities and trainings to encourage alumni communication, as well as in-person activities that bring alumni and other targeted groups together;
- Develop and promote training curricula and methodology, and encourage alumni to become trainers; and
- Create, advertise and maintain Internet access sites for target audiences in the former Soviet Union.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGIES

The evaluation was conducted in seven countries: Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. These countries represented 78 percent of the IATP Centers that had been established at the time the proposal was solicited.

The evaluation employed several data collection strategies:

- An online survey of alumni users, community users and IATP Center staff and trainers;
- A telephone interview of alumni non-users;
- An e-mail survey of the webmasters and U.S. Commercial Service representatives;
- Focus groups of alumni users, community users, and staff and trainers;
- Site visits to IATP Centers in each of the countries chosen for the study; and
- Open-ended interviews with U.S. grantees, program officers, and other key informants.

The instruments for the online survey of users and telephone survey of alumni non-users were designed by Aguirre International, vetted by ECA and Program staff, field tested in Russia in July 2004, and posted online between October and November 2004. Overall, 4,324 individuals responded to the survey via a link on the logon page of the IATP Center computers. In-country research partners conducted

telephone interviews with 401 ECA alumni who had not used the Centers in previous six months. Both the online and telephone surveys were conducted in the language of choice of the respondent (Armenian, Belarusian, Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik, Ukrainian, or Uzbek).

In addition, the evaluation team, with the help of their in-country research partners, conducted 39 focus groups with alumni, community users and staff, and visited 46 different IATP Centers between July 2004 and February 2005.

Summary of Data Collection Methods by Country				
Country	Online Surveys	Telephone Surveys	Site Visits	Focus Groups
Armenia	129	32	4	3
Belarus	88	27	5	3
Kyrgyzstan	127	12	5	4
Russia	2267	206	18	14
Tajikistan	49	12	4	2
Ukraine	327	80	6	7
Uzbekistan	148	32	4	6
Other/Unknown*	255	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	4324	401	46	39
*Unable to determine source through IP address (persons in third countries)				
<i>Note: Totals do not include 120 alumni surveys and 745 community user surveys submitted by persons who had not used IATP Centers and dial-up services in the previous six months.</i>				

ASSESSMENT BY KEY PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The Internet Access and Training Program is meeting its baseline legislative and programmatic goals to provide Internet connectivity and access to USG program alumni and other key audiences; train those audiences in the use of Internet and other ICT resources; facilitate contact between alumni and with host institutions and sponsoring organizations; and foster a community of Internet networks and free exchange of information in Eurasia. The table below outlines these desired outcomes.

<p><i>Outcome 1: Encourage users to develop and promote contacts and links with non-profits and academic institutions in the region and worldwide.</i></p>	<p>Trainings, presentations and/or discussions are hosted by Centers to include topics in non-profit and academic fields, creating links.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In site visits, such links included university departments, NGOs with common areas of activity, trainings for educators of different age groups and of students with special needs, and professional development trainings for doctors, lawyers, journalists and others. <p>Alumni have on-going positive interactions with American institutions and those around the world and ability, initiative, and opportunity to create new links.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most of the alumni respondents (91.2%) use the IATP Centers to help them stay in touch with colleagues and friends in the United States. <p>Alumni and other users create projects and links with such organizations either professionally or personally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nearly half of the community user respondents (49.0%) have made some kind of contact related to the United States in the past six months.
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"It's our group's responsibility, in fact, to find and build connections with Model U.N. clubs all over the world. We have connections with clubs in Canada, the United States, Europe, all over Russia. Another advantage of the group and the M.U.N. conference is using and practicing English. That's the official working language, and we just wouldn't get this kind of practice without it."
Magadan (Russia) Community User Focus Group Participant

Outcome 2: Create methods and media and encourage alumni to do so as well, for alumni and others to be in contact via the Web.

Programs, software, chats and other modalities are developed and advertised.

- Site visits revealed two cases of new software being developed, a screen reader for the blind and an HTML program.
- Many websites have been designed and chats were widely used.

Training in communications media is provided for alumni and other users, both directly and through the creation of websites and distance learning courses.

- 85.0% of staff responded that basic web design is offered at their IATP Centers.
- Limited website hosting is available in all countries, depending on the capacities of the Centers. For example, IATP in Belarus provides web hosting service for approximately 560 websites.
- Distance learning has been a special focus in Russia. The Irkutsk IATP Center provided distance learning to over 2,500 students in the form of a 15-day, four-module Internet course. The other countries are beginning to move in this direction.

Centers advertise and promote these activities, offering contests or other incentives and providing tools and support for creation and maintenance.

- Projects are designed with sharing in mind, such as a WWII history project among school children in Irkutsk, Russia, for the design of a website celebrating local soldiers or others affected by the war on its 60th anniversary.

"The Center cooperates well with the Brest Law Association. That organization has not only built its web-page at the IATP Center, but also organizes chats during which they give professional consultations. The IATP Center organizes many other chats, even international ones: for example, a chat of lawyers from several IATP Centers in Belarus with lawyer from Moldova. The Center also organized cooperation with a journalist from the newspaper 'Viechiernyi Brest', which started from basic trainings, then learned how to create website and finally they created site of their newspaper."
Brest, Belarus Site Visit

Outcome 3: Develop and carry out plans for organizational training and support for local initiatives, engaging community activists and alumni where those overlap.

Training in Internet usage with instruction on seeking capacity-building resources.

- Integration of Centers and their partner organizations led to libraries, universities, NGOs and other organizations coordinating their own training needs with Center offerings. Capacity building is thus brought into being by partner and Center initiative, in line with the needs they themselves define.

NGO and partner use sought through advertising and programming that meets local needs.

- In site visits, evaluators found courses targeted to people in various professions such as medicine, educators at all levels, library science and research, legal and civil education, and professional development.
- The largest categories of professionals to whom trainings were targeted were NGO development and capacity building, with a variety of courses offered on the basis of expressed local needs.

	<p>Centers will reach out to local NGOs and partner actors and encourage alumni liaisons based on shared interests.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 92.3% of community users and 69.7% of alumni reported that the IATP Center offered opportunities to work in their communities. • NGOs are targeted by most Centers for inclusion in programming. Project Harmony and IREX ask their Administrators to conduct outreach to likely NGO and educational users. <p>Centers used for exchange of information, not just resource downloading, entertainment, etc. Community organizing and meeting will be encouraged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nearly 45.0% of alumni reported that the Center is a focal meeting point for interacting with one another, and that this is one of the most important reasons they use the Center. • Centers have become meeting places for Model U.N. groups, student collaboration, social service and educational NGOs, and a myriad other uses. • Users report that their primary reasons for visiting the Centers are the free access and training, and the availability of help at the Centers.
<p>“The Center Coordinator found a niche in the social and educational needs in Volzhsk. They decided who to target in training by first looking for weak points in social life where projects could be helpful: crime, addiction. Then he sought educators and people in the social realm with interest in these areas, and worked to train them in specialized Internet and computer skills.” <i>Volzhsk (Russia) Focus Group Participant</i></p>	
<p><i>Outcome 4: Develop activities and trainings to encourage alumni communication as well as in-person activities that bring alumni and other targeted groups together.</i></p>	<p>Trainings in communications applications will be offered and such applications will be used by alumni for projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of alumni respondents, about 35.0% said that website design was the topic of their most recent training. • Projects by alumni abound, hosted independently or on implementers’ servers. <p>Centers will create online activities that include alumni from different programs and the target audiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than a third of alumni (36.0%) reported participating in online discussion groups, and 88.0% of these found the groups useful. Most frequently cited topic categories were conflict resolution and humanitarian issues (52.7%) and technology and communications topics (50.6%). <p>Centers will encourage face-to-face alumni interaction with events and activities that are advertised widely. Grantees will also set up such activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80.3% of alumni responded that they had participated in alumni meetings at the Centers. Nearly 75.0% said they had attended lectures, talks or other presentations. • Alumni interviewed in site visits frequently cited, without prompting, the overwhelming value of alumni interaction – for the shared experiences of the exchanges, for the networking opportunities of well-connected and highly motivated alumni, and for the commitment to community action through Center resources and Internet access. <p>Centers form alumni associations for communication and activities among alumni and between the alumni and target audiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni associations were frequently sited at Centers and/or American Corners (which were co-located in several cases).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active associations in several regions enacted community projects, shared networks, and related their experiences in the United States.
<p>“Last week I was invited to participate in the project 'connect.uz' – providing Uzbek schools with computers. Each week they invite one guest on a certain topic. The topic was 'Who I am going to become?' They invited me as a journalist. They are making announcements in all schools connected to the Internet via their program. Children are coming and asking questions. I was answering their questions on-line for one hour. It was interesting—children sometimes ask very good questions. I myself enjoyed it. Before me they invited a translator, a banker, and a lawyer.” <i>Uzbek Alumni Focus Group Participant</i></p>	
<p><i>Outcome 5: Develop and promote training curricula methodology and encourage alumni and to become trainers.</i></p>	<p>Training programs and curricula are developed, approved and implemented.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All Centers provide training courses in three areas: basic personal computer skills, basic internet skills, and website design, as well as more advanced courses. <p>Trainers trained from user and alumni communities, with special encouragement for alumni, and capacity is developed for ongoing training after program ends.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 29.0% of alumni respondents have volunteered as trainers. Alumni in towns and smaller cities participated as trainers at a higher rate (58.1%) than those in larger urban areas. Another 14% of community user respondents (over 150 individuals) also have served as trainers. Over 72.0% of IATP staff reported that the employees of their partner institutions have attended training. In some remote areas, IREX and Project Harmony have sent mobile training teams to give trainers new content and pedagogical skills for use in Center trainings. <p>Many and varied trainings are carried out in the access sites. Users are consulted to determine training priorities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More advanced courses include software related to advanced professional applications, such as architectural software, database management, advanced web design, library and civil information search tools, and others. Site Administrators reported asking first-time users of the Centers what kinds of trainings they would most like to take; then, ongoing polling of users (77.0% of alumni reported having been polled for their opinions) further informed training decisions, as did user problems and frequently-asked questions.
<p>“The Center conducted a program called Mobile Trainings. All alumni could participate, and were encouraged to prepare a training plan. I submitted five to six trainings that I could conduct. IREX selected three of the trainings and advertised them: How to Advance NGOs, Business Education, and Basics of Successful Entrepreneurship.” <i>Khujand (Tajikistan) Alumni Focus Group Participant</i></p>	
<p><i>Outcome 6: Create, advertise and maintain Internet access sites for targeted audiences in Eurasia.</i></p>	<p>Number of Centers and that number’s correspondence with targeted audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> At the time of the evaluation there were 249 IATP Centers across Eurasia. 60.0% of alumni and community user respondents visit their Centers five or more times a month. <p>Qualities of Centers, including facilities, hours, numbers served, downtime, most and least used services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 93.9% of the alumni and 90.4% of the community users were satisfied or very satisfied with IATP Center services. Over 63%

	<p>of alumni, and over 61% of community user respondents, rated the quality of their Centers' Internet connections as "very good" or "excellent."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both alumni (70.5%) and community users (77.0%) selected Internet research as one of the IATP services they valued most highly. Other frequently cited services were Center trainings, e-mail usage, and usage of software such as Word and Excel. • Dial-up modem pools are available at less than half of the IATP Centers. For some, this was because of infrastructure cost, while for other Centers, it was a conscious choice, in order to keep alumni coming to the Center to visit face-to-face and meet others. <p>Staff assist users to meet needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 90.0% of both alumni and community user respondents rated the IATP Center staff as "helpful" or "very helpful." • Over a quarter of community users and nearly a third of alumni stated that having Center staff available to help them was an important reason why they used the Centers.
<p>"I am an alumna of FSA U-grad, in Michigan, where I studied in college. I want to say that, when a person first returns here from the United States, it feels like an 'information blockade.' After being there, I can hardly imagine my life without Internet. At the Center there is also access to Ukrainian resources, and the programs for us alumni keep us up to date, even on Ukraine!" <i>Lugansk (Ukraine) Alumni User</i></p>	

LOOKING AHEAD

There is no question that the Centers fill a critical need for both alumni and community users and play a vital role in their personal and professional lives. More importantly, the Centers serve as a catalyst for creating networks between individuals and organizations that facilitate and promote the free exchange of information. The real challenge facing the Program is how to ensure that the Centers adapt to the changing needs of their varied constituencies and become self-sustaining in the face of declining ECA funding.

To that end, the evaluators conclude that IATP Centers consider the following suggestions:

- Ensure that Centers are centrally located and accessible by public transportation;
- Provide flexible hours of operation for employed users to visit the Centers after work or on weekends;
- Upgrade equipment and Internet connection speed in order to be competitive with other commercial Internet services;
- Regularly assess the training needs of users and provide the basic trainings most desired by community users and the higher level, more advanced courses sought by alumni users;
- Leverage untapped alumni and community experts to provide advanced training and local staff management capacity;
- Explore the idea of turning the increasing demand for English language training into paid training courses offered by the Centers;
- Award a certification or documentation of successful completion of IATP training (if possible, Ministry-approved);

- Collaborate with alumni associations in the preparations for sustainability—a strong alumni association may be able to take on some of the responsibilities and services of the Centers; and
- Develop local staff management capacity in order for the Centers to become self-sustaining by implementing a fee-for-service model—training them in marketing and fundraising techniques, responsibility to donors and funders, budget management, and reporting requirements.

The fee-for-service model, however, poses a difficult dilemma for the Program. Realistically, if some or all of the services become fee-based for community users and perhaps to a lesser extent, alumni, demand for them will lessen and many users with low incomes or no other access to a computer will be left on the other side of the “digital divide.”

These lower income and hard-to-reach community user groups are most frequently concentrated in smaller cities and non-urban areas where alternative access to the Internet and training is extremely limited and local resources are scarce. Thus, self-sustainability will come at the cost of those who need the services of this program the most.

Although a number of current alumni users state that they would continue to use the Centers if a modest fee for service is applied, these users note that the charges of fees for training must be commensurate with or lower than retail prices and the training must be of high quality.

The evaluators conclude that if the Department of State wishes to continue “to promote and support democracy, public-private sector partnerships, and civil society by linking the communities of Eurasia to the global information infrastructure,” then the Centers must continue to be subsidized for the foreseeable future, especially in the non-urban areas.

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