

International Scholarship Graduates Influencing Social and Economic Development at Home: The Role of Alumni Networks in Georgia and Moldova

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Many students from low- and middle-income countries seek scholarship support to pursue higher education overseas. Often scholarship programs mandate that recipients “give back” to their home countries following their studies so scholars “apply” their experiences to aid their countries of origin. In this comparative qualitative study, 40 Georgian and Moldovan scholarship alumni who studied in the United States were asked how alumni networks assist their ability to influence social and economic change in their home countries. The comparative findings point to the value of alumni networks in terms of graduates backing each other’s activism projects and feeling part of a community of like-minded individuals who seek change. Where these networks were not present, alumni desired a supportive association to assist in their attempts to influence reform. Findings suggest the development of alumni networks facilitate individual scholarship participants’ efforts to “give back” to their countries of origin.

Introduction

A common goal of higher education is to prepare students for their future: to acquire appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities for the marketplace; to earn an adequate salary; and to positively contribute to one’s community and society. For students from low- and middle-income countries who pursue higher education in high-income countries¹, the home country context in which they pursue these goals may be significantly different from the environment in which they studied. In their countries of origin, students may have access to fewer financial resources and face associated challenges, such as low-quality infrastructure, more public health concerns, and higher rates of corruption.

Due to financial constraints in low- and middle-income countries, the soaring costs of tuition, and the financial demands of daily living in high-income countries, many students who pursue degrees abroad are sponsored by a third party (Institute of International Education, 2016). Donor support can come from many sources: domestic and foreign country governments, home and host universities, private foundations, international

organizations, businesses, and individual philanthropy. Despite the specific funder, a majority of scholarship sponsors mandate that sponsored students “give back” in a way that aids the home country. For example, The MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program notes:

The intention of Scholars to “give back” to their communities and countries is integral to achieving the goals of the Program. Scholars’ commitment to make a difference in the lives of others is nurtured and encouraged in a variety of ways such as volunteerism, service learning, entrepreneurial skill development and more. (2015, p. 4)

How “giving back” is defined ranges broadly across scholarship programs, from contractual employment to goodwill between countries. Despite this variety, scholarship programs are widely viewed as tools for national development, evidenced by their recent inclusion as one of the education targets in the United Nation’s Sustainability Goals: “By 2020, to substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education” (United Nations, 2016). The assumption is that quality higher education is an opportunity to be afforded to all talented young people, even if it means crossing national borders and obtaining financial support from third parties to reach this goal.

The model that undergirds most scholarships – that talented students will be educated in quality universities in high-income countries and then return home to apply their knowledge and skills for the advancement of their home country – raises questions about program impact and efficacy. Scholars have long debated issues related to “brain drain” (see Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport, 2008; Di Maria & Lazarova, 2012), the “global knowledge economy” (Gürüz, 2011), and push and pull factors of internationally mobile students (Odhiambo, 2013; Polovina, 2011) to suggest international higher education has the potential of aiding a country’s national development, yet also may contribute to pulling the most qualified graduates from their countries to better economic opportunities abroad. However, these studies mostly focus on an unspecified group of internationally mobile students, not scholarship graduates expected to “give back.”

An additional challenge to understanding how scholarship program alumni contribute to social and economic development in their home countries is a focus on individual alumni trajectories instead of accomplishments made by a group (see examples in Kalisman, 2015 and Volkman, Dassin, & Zurbuchen, 2009). By profiling individual scholars, almost no attention is given to the alumni networks that may help, or hinder, the individual’s accomplishments. Previous studies indicate this is an oversight, as alumni networks around the world are helpful to university graduates to 1) find employment (Chiavacci,

2005) and 2) engage in volunteerism and charitable giving (Farrow & Yaun, 2011). However, these studies focus on graduates in high-income countries, likely with better remuneration packages and more extensive alumni networks. Moreover, these networks are usually a collection of graduates from a single university, which is not typically the case with scholarship networks.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the role of alumni networks in helping or hindering international scholarship graduates to “give back” to their low- and middle-income countries of origin. By exploring the characteristics of alumni networks, this research may aid scholarship graduates and program sponsors and administrators in the goal of advancing social and economic development in the graduates’ home countries. Specifically, the questions addressed are:

- i) How do alumni networks aid in sponsored students’ activities in “giving back” to their countries of origin following their scholarship, if at all?
- ii) What national contextual characteristics influence the success of alumni networks?

To answer these questions, a qualitative study was conducted to compare the experiences and perceptions of scholarship recipients from the Republics of Georgia and Moldova. Forty graduates were asked about their activities related to “giving back” to their home countries, including the role of alumni networks. Comparing the sets of scholarship graduates from Georgia and Moldova is suitable due to two main factors. First, the two countries have similar geopolitical profiles: Both countries declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and have struggled with the transition from communism to democracy; both countries have a history of citizen uprisings to demand the Soviet-style government be replaced with pro-market liberalized governments; and both have “frozen” conflicts within their borders, with separatist populations seeking independence (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016a & 2016b). Second, Georgia and Moldova have each utilized a strategy of national human capital development via higher education abroad, “a particularly beneficial” strategy for the former states of the Soviet Union (Perna, Orosz, Jumakulov, Kishkentayeva, & Ashirbekov, 2015, p. 174). Moreover, the same or similar scholarship programs have been offered in both countries, such as the Edmund S. Muskie Graduates Fellowship Program (sponsored in part by the U.S. Government) and the Civil Servant Scholarships (sponsored in part by the Open Society Foundations).

Conceptual and Methodological Frameworks

The conceptual framework undergirding most international higher education scholarships is closely linked to human capital theory. Succinctly put, human capital theory states that the money invested in an individual’s education has a positive economic

return for the individual (Becker, 1975; Schultz, 1963; Smith, 1952) and improved social and economic outcomes for their community (McMahon, 1999, 2009). In the case of sponsored international higher education, this theory suggests that the financial investment made in the form of tertiary education will build a selected student's capabilities and this student will then improve the economic and social conditions in their local community, anticipated to be in their country of origin.

The methodological framework for this study was informed by Schutz's (1967) theory of social phenomenology, which states that qualitative research serves to understand the subjective experience of individuals in their daily lives and allows individuals to create judgments about these experiences. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher attempted to get a broad picture of scholarship graduates' experiences by asking them to reflect on: 1) their contributions to social and economic change in their home countries following program participation, and 2) the contributions of their scholarship peers. Taking the analysis one step further, these qualitative data were aggregated by country – one of Georgian alumni and one of Moldovan alumni – for comparative purposes.

Sampling Procedure and Data Collection

In accordance with social phenomenology, scholarship students were interviewed to ascertain their understanding of how they, and their scholarship peers, “give back” to their country of origin. To narrow the pool of interview candidates, selection criteria were set: Eligible participants had to have participated in a scholarship program to study in the United States, at the Master's level, between the years 1996 and 2014. Interviewees were recruited via scholarship program listservs, social media, public presentations, and word of mouth. Ultimately, 26 Georgian and 25 Moldovan graduates responded, and 20 from each country were selected for diversity among demographic characteristic². The selection of these 20 interviewees was primarily to gather a broad range of perspectives and experiences (e.g., to avoid an overrepresentation of a specific program) in line with achieving maximum variation in the sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Women were the majority of interviewees (15 Georgian and 11 Moldovan)³, and participants' sponsors included the U.S. Government, the Governments of Georgia and Moldova, host universities, private foundations, and individual philanthropists. As no comprehensive list of graduates of sponsored study exists, it is difficult to estimate the degree to which the interviewees represent the total population.

Interviews were semi-structured and utilized responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), allowing the researcher to gather interpretations and explore certain experiences or details in depth. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, with 23 conducted in person and 17 conducted via phone or Skype. Transcripts were coded using a hybrid approach of

inductive and deductive coding and theme development (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) with MAXQDA12 software. Following each country's set of 20 interviews, the dominant themes were identified; later the two cases were compared in line with Ragin's case-oriented approach, which asserts that analytically comparing cases produces insight into "categories of empirical phenomenon" (2013, p. 35), the goal of this study.

Findings

Graduates of U.S. scholarships tended to view alumni networks as useful tools to organize and drive social and economic change in their home countries. Calling other graduates "very interesting and successful people" and "ideological comrades," interviewees noted that their scholarship peers provided support for their activities through advice, encouragement, and volunteering; collaborated directly on team projects; and organized to address larger social problems. By connecting with other alumni across years of participation, professions, and levels of experience, interviewees noted that the networks were—or could be—instrumental in the country's socioeconomic development.

In Georgia and Moldova, alumni networks included both formal, registered organizations and informal collaborations. Membership was organized in various ways (e.g., participants in a single scholarship program or alumni who have been sponsored by the U.S. Government) and the group's founders differed (e.g., scholarship sponsor or alumni leaders). A few had been incorporated as independent non-profit organizations. The structure and frequency of meeting was quite different, although main communication was conducted electronically. Next, each country's case is explored below.

Georgian alumni networks Georgian scholarship graduates considered themselves part of the "critical mass" of western-educated individuals who have led Georgia's development, and they highly valued their connection to other alumni. Almost all Georgian alumni (17 of 20) mentioned they had existing formal or informal ties with other alumni, and there appeared to be no difference between those who lived in Georgia or abroad. Many regularly spoke with those who were in their same scholarship cohort, while others had made connections among those who participated in different programs and or at different intervals.

Moreover, this familiarity led to trust, both professional and personal, among Georgians with U.S. degrees. As one example, an alumna talks about her relationships with 12 other alumni who were in the same scholarship cohort, "So, it was very easy for me and for us to keep together as a group, and we still keep in touch, almost 20 years later." She said she trusts others in her program because, "I know what [they] went through, sort of, because I went through the same. So, I'm sort of assured of your quality." Another alumnus echoes this point, saying a scholarship is, "like a business card. You know, if I know someone [had a scholarship], it's much easier for me to approach this person

because there are, definitely, the shared values.” Eleven other alumni reiterated these beliefs that one can assume scholarship alumni have certain values or principles and that these individuals can be trusted.

The alumni interviewed for this study mentioned two formal alumni networks most often: 1) The U.S. Government Exchange Program Alumni Association of Georgia (EPAG)⁴, and 2) The Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW). In addition to these formally registered groups, alumni mentioned informal groups organized around their specific scholarship programs, individual interests, or host universities. Membership in these associations not only helped alumni to meet peers but also to make connections for future employment or volunteer projects. This was especially true for those alumni based in the capital city of Tbilisi, where alumni noted that other scholarship graduates were a vital part of their professional networks. Several interviewees admitted to turning to graduate networks to advertise job postings; likewise, alumni provided stories about finding employment from other alumni, even those they had not met in person. Five alumni noted that they prefer to hire other scholarship grantees, and one alumnus highlighted that western education was a prerequisite for starting work at his law firm.

To provide insight into the mechanics of an alumni group serving as a professional network, an example from one alumnus is especially illustrative. This alumnus recounted a time when she recruited consultants to introduce a new policy approach to the ministry for which she was working. She explained, “the Minister created a [new] department, but we couldn’t find a head of department. And also we were looking for local trainers or temporary consultants for very specific [type of] analysis work.” She chose to engage an alumni listserv managed by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) office in Georgia, “So, I went to IREX to ask for professionals, maybe for graduate students, who were doing research, who wanted to contribute.” Having these networks allowed graduates to find those with special skills, as well as to further enhance and hone specific ideas.

In addition, Georgian scholarship recipients noted that other alumni were a significant part of their personal network. Those with scholarships in the U.S. tended to socialize with and know the personal details of other alumni. As one example, an alumnus talked about how a group of alumni decided to gather for a Christmas celebration, inviting those not just of their own scholarship program, but others who had attended the same university on other scholarships. She said, “I just met with most of the people a week ago, in fact, and we just discussed...our roles in helping developing this country.” She added that those living in Tbilisi had decided that together they would organize a club and try to apply for grants related to education reform.

These acts of self-organizing into groups, using those groups to form teams committed to a certain project, and applying for project funding was fairly commonplace among Georgian graduates. Graduates also noted that working within the parameters of a formalized alumni organization—one registered with the government, had a leadership and communication structure, operated under bylaws, and had fiscal infrastructure—hastened project development and facilitated partnership with other organizations.

Graduates also mentioned their involvement in projects that included efforts to start new degree programs at universities, to offer services for children with disabilities, to raise awareness about domestic violence, and to clean up the environment. In one particularly successful case (according to multiple interviewees), the GASW was founded by a group of social work graduates primarily from Columbia University and Washington University in St. Louis and sponsored by the Open Society Foundations. As is true with the GASW, which advocates for “the rights, recognition and importance of social workers in Georgia and the clients they serve” and led the establishment of social work degree programs at two Georgian universities (Georgian Association of Social Workers, 2015), scholarship recipients saw their peers as action-oriented, trustworthy, and able to execute programs that led to social and economic change in Georgia.

Moreover, it appeared that alumni thought of themselves, in part, as a member of a larger group, using terms such as “critical mass” and “a community that once was selected as the people who could get degrees from the best universities in the world and then come back and help develop areas in which we would work.” While graduates admitted that not all projects have been successful, they noted that with the help of other alumni, they were able to boost their individual contributions to social and economic development. These networks symbolized not only social support for alumni, but they also represented a group of trusted partners and future collaborators with a shared enthusiasm for social and economic change in Georgia.

Moldovan alumni networks When compared to their peers in Georgia, Moldovan interviewees very rarely mentioned alumni networks as a vehicle to spur social and economic development at home. Of the 20 Moldovan interviewees, only two—both U.S. Government alumni—mentioned alumni activities as central to the way they “give back” to Moldova, and in both of those instances, they were asked to volunteer by the Embassy. Three alumni mentioned the international networks of their host universities, but they only mentioned these in vague terms—mostly related to knowledge of their existence and to receiving fundraising requests—not in terms of active engagement. Instead, Moldovan alumni spoke more often about their individual accomplishments or those done in cooperation with professional colleagues.

When Moldovan interviewees spoke about alumni networks, they mostly mentioned activities that are organized and maintained by the U.S. Embassy in Moldova or the U.S.

Department of State. The U.S. Embassy maintains an Alumni Resource Center that provides reference materials and leads activities for graduates of U.S. Government educational exchange programs, ranging from academic degree programs to short-term and professional visits. Each year these alumni are invited to an Alumni Congress, where selected alumni are awarded for outstanding alumni contributions to Moldova.

Despite the effort put into these alumni events by the U.S. Government and several alumni leaders, interviewees referred to the alumni network as loose and not vibrant. One alumnus who had a leadership position described it this way, struggling with her apparent ambivalence, "So, it's a pretty close community. Not close. It's, um, a big community of alumni and we work together on a lot of events. So, it's kind of easy to keep in touch with them." Continuing, she said she keeps in touch with other alumni, "not because I choose to but because I kind of have to," suggesting with some reluctance, "you never know who you might collaborate with because, as I said, it's a small country, it's a small city, so we do get to meet all these alumni." The interviewee's tone, matched by other alumni who participated in this study, was that alumni networking was something that happened by default rather than through active planning and willful engagement.

Moreover, this uncertain attitude to scholarship graduate networks seems to be one that developed over time. Seven alumni noted specifically that they were eager to be involved in an alumni community, but with time their interest has waned. As an example, one alumnus living in Chisinau said:

I'm not as good as keeping with alumni here in Moldova. I went to a few events at some point, but I didn't find that this was a great place to meet [others] because they kind of mixed everyone [and] didn't have a Muskie-specific group. So, I never used that again. (Interviewee, November 5, 2014)

Another alumnus said she was asked several times to provide free trainings to students or alumni or to participate on scholarship selection panels. However, other than these invited events, she had not been engaged. Three others indicated that their involvement with the alumni community dwindled when the Muskie program ended with the final cohort selected in 2012. One said this was an extreme disappointment because he applied to Muskie specifically because "the Americans seem to take care more of the whole process [of networking]" and he was seeking to connect with other alumni upon his graduation.

Several other alumni noted that despite the work of the U.S. Government's Alumni Resource Center, the alumni networks could be improved to attend to the needs of their members. As one alumnus stated, there is still much to do "to make sure that alumni have

opportunities to develop and grow in Moldova when they come back.” Of the current structure, one alumnus summarized her position, saying:

I do want this association to work for the alumni that return, but I also want to promote this idea that we also need to help them facilitate their activities in the country. Because, first of all, a lot of alumni are leaving the country – even the Master’s programs. How many can you see [here in Moldova]? There are some, but not too many. The majority have [sic] left in the first three years... And that’s only about Muskies, but if you look at other programs, it’s the same thing. And there are some alumni that work somewhere in the region, and maybe they would want to do something, but they don’t have that support. We’re not offering that, and at this point. (Interviewee, October 29, 2014)

Moreover, five alumni mentioned they would like to see more profiles of western educated alumni who have returned, stayed in Moldova, and excelled through outstanding contributions. Alumni claimed that historically it has been difficult to stay interested in contributing to Moldovan society when alumni perceive that so many peers are going abroad – even those who had leadership roles in the alumni community⁵. One alumnus who currently lives abroad said that overseas you see examples of honest, hard work leading to success, “and you don’t have so many cases in Moldova.”

On the whole, alumni who live abroad reported little engagement in Moldovan alumni networks. One alumnus who lives in the United States said, “So at some point [while living in Moldova], I got disconnected from the association or the community, and especially when I moved the U.S., the disconnect became even bigger.” After stating that he follows the alumni association activities on Facebook, he said, “I’m not that connected. [...] I’m just more of a passive observer.” In another interesting example, one alumnus who lived in Moscow after her scholarship talked about her role with the alumni of U.S. Government programs – however as an active member of the Russian Muskie club, not the Moldovan.

Although alumni indicated they had not been so active in alumni organizations, those who live in Moldova emphasized their desire for a vibrant network. Some thought it was too difficult to mobilize alumni when so many were overseas, while others were more optimistic, believing that alumni can unite to significantly improve Moldova’s socioeconomic situation. One alumnus noted that alumni should be asked to be involved. She explained, “If you have a couple of persons that are stubborn and they still want to make a difference, then ‘yes! We can go!’ But some may be modest, like ‘Ok, you don’t ask me what can I do.’”

One possible improvement to the alumni network in Moldova, as suggested by alumni, is to shift the leadership from the U.S. Government at the top to an alumni-led effort. Of the current structure, one alumnus said:

There is an alumni program, but it's all funded by the U.S. Embassy, it's maintained by the U.S. Embassy, where all the alumni are welcome. We have alumni meeting. We have Alumni Congress. But this not done by the [Moldovan] Government. This is not done by Moldovan society. It keeps maintaining [sic] by U.S. Embassy. They still do the part of the job that I prefer Moldova would do for us. It's like U.S. is paying for us, U.S. is hosting us, and when we come back, U.S. is still trying to integrate us back. (Interviewee, January 8, 2015)

However, the U.S. Government's role in alumni networks may not necessarily be because it hesitated to relinquish its leadership; alumni rarely offered to take a more significant role in the alumni network themselves.

On the whole, Moldovan alumni seem rather uninspired and nonchalant about current networks, yet recognized that they could be powerful forces in spurring social and economic reform. Of the alumni of her scholarship program, one alumnus said, "it's a network unused." Strikingly, very few interviewees mentioned a desire to start a new or rekindle an existing alumni initiative in the future.

Discussion: Comparing the Cases

When comparing the cases of Georgia and Moldova, graduates from both countries see other scholarship recipients as possible collaborators and are interested in learning more about others' expertise, experiences, and skills. Interviewees also reported that strong and vital networks aid individual graduates in "giving back" and contributing to national social and economic development in their home countries.

However, the ways that these alumni networks are organized and function are very different between the two countries. In the case of Georgia, multiple networks provided the frame and support for ambitious and creative alumni to propose projects, find collaborators, and apply for funding for progressive projects. In Moldova, the networks were loose or nonexistent—and to some graduates, ineffective. Moldovan scholarship graduates wished for stronger ties with other scholarship alumni as a way to promote social and economic change. Therefore, returning to the first question of this study, alumni networks—where they exist—appear to assist sponsored students in "giving back" to their home countries.

With these findings in mind, why would Georgian alumni develop and participate in networks at a greater rate than Moldova alumni? This is especially curious given that the

U.S. Government and other funders presumably offer similar support and resources for alumni networks and projects in both countries. This query is in line with the second research question of this study: What national contextual characteristics influence the success of these alumni networks?

Two contributing factors provide some clues. First, alumni interviewed for this study estimated that 80-90% of Georgian alumni return to live and work in their home country, compared to 40-50% of Moldovan alumni. (No exact figures of the current residence of sponsored students with U.S. degrees are available.) More alumni in the country leads to more people contributing to networks, thereby developing more ideas, building stronger projects, and having a larger network of trusted peers with whom to share information and work. In addition, with greater membership in alumni groups, more individuals can share the difficult work of fighting against social norms to introduce new policies, practices, and activities that contribute to social and economic change in society.

The second factor that could influence the difference between alumni networks in Georgia and Moldova is the transition towards a more open and progressive society that happened earlier in Georgia. With the Rose Revolution in 2003 and new leadership by Mikheil Saakashvili (a scholarship recipient himself), two important messages were conveyed: 1) it is time for reform in Georgia, using instructive examples from the U.S. and Europe (Saakashvili, 2006), and 2) western education—especially American education—is exemplary preparation for leadership and public service. Taken together, graduates looked to others with similar experience abroad and asked these peers to help with various initiatives, and graduates were incentivized to affiliate with these prestigious groups to advance their connections and reputations. In many ways, formal and informal alumni associations served as a clearinghouse for ideas, from which social- and economic-themed projects emerged.

In Moldova, on the other hand, similar change was more piecemeal and less extensive following the Twitter Revolution of 2009 (European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, 2016). In this slowly-changing context, many alumni described a society impervious to change, and one that did not place the same value on their U.S. degrees. Consequently, alumni perceived their home country as one unwelcoming to their ideas or proposed projects. In turn, this resulted in alumni not asking others to support their work, and when they looked for partners, they felt disheartened by the large number of alumni residing abroad.

In summary, motivated individuals hoping to change their societies—like those selected for competitive international scholarship programs—tend to seek the support and partnership of other scholarship alumni to advance and enact their ideas. This desire to collaborate with other graduates is not particularly in line with many scholarship

programs' – and, on a larger scale, human capital's – theory of change which states that a student will individually benefit and then independently contribute to change at home. To the contrary, this research indicates that individuals seek a community of like-minded individuals to facilitate individual or group actions to enact social or economic change in their countries of origin. Where alumni networks are not as active – as in the case of Moldova – alumni note that the lack of networking or community with other alumni is a barrier to their own meeting of the scholarship aims.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it would be logical to assume that when the same or similar scholarship programs are offered in multiple countries that the purpose of alumni networks, their structure, and their level of activity would be correspondingly alike. However, despite similar motivations for starting and facilitating alumni networks in multiple countries, there were striking contrasts between the networks in Georgia and Moldova at the time of this research. First, the number and vitality of the alumni networks differ. Second, alumni viewed the efficacy of these networks differently, such as how they utilized the networks to make connections and friends, seek partners or volunteers for projects, or find employment. For Georgians, alumni networks embodied a “critical mass” that was leading change in the country, with alumni organizations serving as activity hubs. For Moldovans, interviewees described the alumni network as a diffuse and “underused resource,” with Moldovan alumni reporting that they wondered if alumni networks were weakened due to so many peers living abroad.

This research calls attention to the potential of networks to better achieve individual's goals in “giving back” as well as the scholarship's overall aim to spur economic and social development in low- and middle-income countries. To reach program goals, scholarship funders and administrators – and program graduates themselves – can prioritize alumni programming to advance initiatives that promote networking, support collaborative projects, and foster leadership of alumni organizations. While the idea of organizing and funding alumni networks and projects is not new, this research sheds light on ways to improve existing initiatives. For example, instead of funders or governments designing and leading initiatives, alumni leaders should direct meetings, events, and projects to create a greater possibility that the network will respond to the perceived concerns of the graduates themselves. Offering a stipend to alumni leaders could be a worthwhile strategy to incentivize graduates to take these important positions. Moreover, funders and administrators can also weigh collective accomplishments on par with individual ones in their program materials, selection criteria, alumni funding, and program evaluation.

Furthermore, alumni networks should bring greater attention to alumni accomplishments and role models – at least in post-Soviet countries that are undergoing political transition.

This specific task is important for three reasons identified in this research. First, by profiling specific individual and group accomplishments, new graduates can see models of success in the transitioning post-Soviet context and perhaps follow a similar path or seek these more experienced alumni for advice. Second, showcasing alumni profiles enhance graduates' ability to connect with each other and develop a better sense of potential collaborators and teams, further strengthening the network. Finally, models of successful alumni who returned to – and excelled in – the country sets a standard of what can be accomplished by graduates, promoting counterexamples to pervasive themes of life overseas equalling success.

As was determined by this research, a more active and connected network indicates a greater chance of alumni being involved in social and economic change in their home countries, therefore creating an increased likelihood of overall program effectiveness. Additional research can further understanding of what qualities and attributes make scholarship alumni networks successful in other countries and how to best transform a network that is struggling.

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¹ Definitions of low-, middle-, and high-income countries are the same as the World Bank's definition of lower-, middle-, and high-income economies (World Bank, 2016).

² Demographic characteristics included sex, scholarship program sponsor, year began scholarship, and country of residency at time of interview.

³ For many international higher education student mobility programs offered in eastern Europe, females are the majority of participants, with the exception of predominantly Muslim countries (Sherman & Campbell, 2005).

⁴ The Muskie scholarship program formerly had its own specific alumni organization for Muskie alumni, but it was morphed into EPAG in 2013-2014.

⁵ Although several individuals noted that this has recently changed with the examples of Maia Sandu and Stela Mocan, two individuals with U.S. education who had leadership roles in the Moldovan Government. In November 2016, Maia Sandu ran for the Moldovan presidency.