

ACTR
“Russian Program of Excellence” Overview:
An Initial Exploration Effort

Rationale:

ACTR has been a leader in the language profession since its inception by including in its ranks teachers at all levels of language education, K through 16. It also leads the profession by incorporating and evaluating in-country immersion as a critical component in the language learning experience. In addition, from the very beginning it has conducted contests and national awards to formally acknowledging the accomplishments of its students. Now, ACTR takes another major step forward by exploring the feasibility of establishing “Russian Program of Excellence” (RPE) initiative, recognizing ‘outstanding Russian language education programs around the country. This Russian Program of Excellence’ (RPE) will proceed on the basis of a set of explicit documents (attached): Standards with accompanying Self-Study, Peer-Review, and Administrative Guidance. The purpose of RPE is to assist the field of Russian language education to adapt to the changing demographics and demands of students entering the university and to the emerging capabilities born of current research and technology in the language field. As a professional society of practitioners and researchers, ACTR is uniquely positioned to support innovative and effective language education in the Russian field through RPE.

The need for such a process is born of the changes in language education that have taken place in the last decade, including the shifting market for language abilities and the growing effectiveness and access of the delivery system. This moment appears as a ‘tipping point’ for language education in the U.S., and ACTR once again is ready to respond.

Why this is appropriate for ACTR, an organization founded on the principal of language education as a K-16 pathway. Today, college and university program face an unprecedented opportunity in the ‘bow wave’ of entering students coming from high school with a broader range of professional interests and a higher level of language proficiency. These students arrive on campus with AP/NEWL certification and/or a Seal of Biliteracy as a result of innovative programs like Dual Language Immersion and in-country study opportunities provided by the DoS ACTR programs. They more and more decline the language major and envision their second language competency as a value added to other professional pursuits. Heritage and indigenous community students arrive with varying levels of language and cultural abilities that contribute to their identity and life plans. Advanced language proficiency and frequent usage and exposure promise significant lifelong educational and intellectual benefits. On the other hand, without this understanding and adaptation to these students and their strengths and ambitions, language enrollments in higher education continue to decline, unfortunately aided by the slide of interest in the humanities more generally.

However, meeting this challenge and opportunity is aided by advances in cognitive science, language acquisition research as well as learning and tracking technologies. And exemplar initiatives of excellence abound, including In-country Immersion, the Flagship Program, AP & NEWL testing, ADFL efforts, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences language education initiative, to mention but a few.

ACTR RPE recognition means that a program:

- Is focused on outcomes
- Is transparent and accountable:
 - Announces its language goals; proficiency, skills & domains
 - Rigorously assesses language proficiency outcomes according to national standards
- Promotes best practices in language and culture education
- Is based on learning outcomes rather than teaching inputs
- Is committed to rigorous and practical overseas study including internships, preferably related to their field of study
- Directly involves faculty and staff in self-assessment and continuous quality improvement processes
- Receives national and professional attestation of its quality

The RPE Process at ACTR

Implementation of the RPE process involves a self-study and peer-review process, both of which are based on explicit Standards, a revised version of the ABET-based standards and the AATG Program of Excellence effort. RPE is designed to identify Russian language programs that can serve as inspirational and practical models demonstrating effective designs that meet the needs of today's language students. The American Councils Research Center (ARC), with oversight from the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of ACTR, will solicit a number of programs that will again volunteer to undergo this pilot process. These pilot programs, working with ARC staff, will provide answers to the following questions:

- Are the Standards, Self-Study/Peer-Review, and Administrative Guidance documents appropriate?
- What revisions would you suggest?
- Can you address all the issues raised? Which are unrealistic? Which need to be added?
- What does it mean for staff and leadership time?
- Is the relevant information available?
- Are face-to-face interviews necessary?

Depending on the answers to these questions, the volunteer programs will proceed with the self-study. ARC will follow through with the peer-review process in order to fix the peer reviewer training and process. Upon completion of the self-study and peer-review process, ARC will evaluate the results and recommend to the ExCom approval or postponement of the designation of 'Russian Programs of Excellence'. As a final wrap-up of the initiative, the ARC, in consultation with the ExCom, will answer the following questions:

- Is this initiative valuable, to programs and to ACTR?
- Is the process viable?
- Are the standards and self-study/peer-review process documents adequate?
- Would you recommend instituting the program on a continuing basis.

ARC will draft a final report, circulate it to all former funders, and published it in appropriate outlets.

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